

ANTASTIC UNIVERSE

SCIENCE FICTION

APRIL
35c

56



STURRING:

THE LAIR OF THE PHOENIX

Thrilling Novel

by STANLEY MULLEN

ALSO:

Short Stories by
H. NEARING, JR.

ALAN E. NOURSE

FRANK B. BRYNING

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THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

H. G. WELLS once observed that a vision of beauty designed to obliterate the uglier aspects of reality would be only half-complete if it did not embrace a member of the opposite sex. He even asks whether it would be possible to think of Eden as a paradise without a woman in it—whether that woman be Eve or Lilith.

We won't explore here the Freudian significance of such a surmise, beyond stressing that its truth cannot be doubted, and that all sensuous beauty—all gardens of delight created by the human imagination to enhance and enrich reality—are probably erotic in origin and constitute not so much a true sublimation as a more or less direct expression of man's basic biological urge.

There is a kind of dream landscape, for instance, that can afford more pleasure to the creative mind than any physical adventuring, however variegated and exciting—such as speeding along a macadamized highway in one of those super fluid-drive cars which TV may yet persuade the unwary to accept as life's chief *raison d'être* under the stars.

It is well to remain constantly vigilant and never forget that there is no viable substitute for that Wellsian dream of ideal beauty, that vision of strangeness and mystery and wonder, with a lovely lady at its core.

And it is just such a vision which Kelly Freas brings us in this month's unusual cover illustration.

At first glance the scene depicted here may seem to be the opposite of ideal. In the far background a terrestrial spaceship has been wrecked beyond repair, and a man and a woman have emerged to confront a hideous sluglike entity with an unmistakable hostility in its stalk-eyed stare. But consider. A struggle will ensue, and the man will undoubtedly triumph. And having won his struggle, the man will be free to make love to the woman, amidst alien splendors undreamed of on Earth.

You've only to put yourself in the man's place to realize that here indeed is a New Eden, with wondrous vistas stretching away to the blue infinite. Here is the Wellsian dream with all of its splendors undimmed—and for its prototype we must go back to Homeric legend, and Ulysses' first glimpse of Circean isles enchanted in the rosy-fingered dawn.

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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by *Albert Dorne*

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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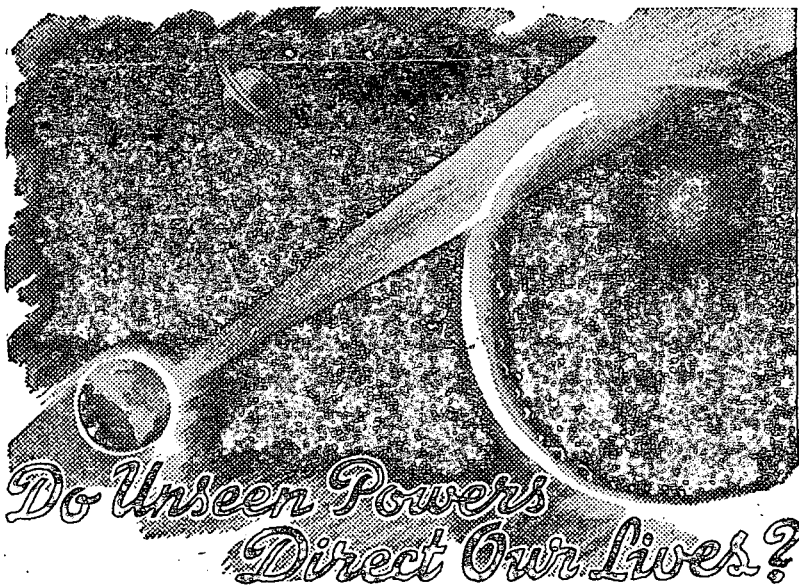
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The ROSICRUCIANS
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the lair of the phoenix

by . . . Stanley Mullen

**The Copperbirds dwelt in a garden
stranger than Eden—and woe to
the hunter whose tread was not to
their liking under Orion's shield.**

NIGHT ON VENUS can be darker than anywhere else in the Solar System with the possible exception of Pluto. On Pluto an astronomer might have noticed a slight gradation of difference, but Jason Hart was no astronomer. If he had been, he would not have lived on Venus, where "poor seeing" is a chronic condition. By trade and inclination Hart was a professional guide and hunter—though his license had gone down the drain with most of the other claims and symbols of respectability.

Now without a single one of those symbols to sustain him, Jason Hart sensed sound and movement somewhere along the unlighted street. Quickly he crouched back into a pool of denser shadows between two squat, vacant-eyed buildings, and the night seemed to swallow him. For a tense moment he waited motionless, his every nerve alert, his stooped shoulders blending with the darkness.

Again he heard the sound. Then a door opened, and a shaft of golden light darted into the street. Hart continued to hug the shadows,

A science fantasy brightly tapestried which weaves its spell with a poet's vision and a wandering minstrel's dedication to sheer wonderment and adventurous surmise is Stanley Mullen's resplendent gift to us here. Few writers have traveled further than Mr. Mullen into the star-bright realms beyond the Dark Tower's skyward ramparts, where fierce loves subtly triumph and strange wars blaze and die. And even fewer have his shining skill with words.

awaiting the appearance of a moving silhouette.

Tonight Jason Hart hunted big game—man. For that noble sport civilized authority rarely issues a license, but Jason Hart did not hunt to kill. His quarry was another hunter as skilled as himself—and as dangerous and elusive. Hart hunted Yuregon, his chief rival among the professional stalkers.

It was impossible to be certain which building Yuregon had entered. Hart could only await patiently the man's reappearance, and hope that he would emerge unarmed, and reasonable. Hart crouched lower, nursing his gun in the crook of his arm.

Shadows shifted within the light, and with an unnerving slowness a silhouette took form. In the doorway stood a girl in a trimly belted coat of metalweave. She was hatless and her hair, which descended to her shoulders, gleamed like spun quicksilver as it caught the light. She strode quickly from the doorway, glancing neither to right nor left. The door behind her remained open, bathing her lithe figure in a ghostly radiance.

Hart cursed silently. Under other circumstances he might have been interested. But at the moment he would gladly have traded all of her beauty for a glimpse of Yuregon's distinctive ugliness.

But seemingly he was about to have both. The girl halted and again shadows stirred within the light. A hunched grotesquerie

shaped somewhat like a man joined the girl. Only by act of law was the gnarled and froglike Yuregon human. He was a type-S5 mutant—a Venusian by birth, but Earth-educated, and he managed to combine in his unlovely personality the worst qualities of both planets.

The door closed suddenly, pinching off the light. Hart emerged from the shadows and by sound alone followed the pair as they moved together into the darkness, their bodies almost touching.

It was late, even for Cyclo City. Except for Yuregon and the girl the streets were deserted. Overhead no stars were visible through the overcast sky beyond the immensity of transparent dome. But phantom squirmings of light-reflection above the distant native quarter provided sufficient diffuse illumination for Hart's hunting-trained vision. With electricity at a premium, a frugal city-administration had salved its conscience by providing flaring fluorescent globes at every third intersection. Within the domed city windows were useless, and totally blank building-fronts faced every street.

With agile purposefulness Hart followed his quarry through three harshly glaring intersections. There was no difficulty about keeping up with them and no risk of losing them, for he was not in the dark as to their objective. But his patience was running out, and his tracking tonight was not for sport alone. At the fourth intersection,

he closed in and called out softly to Yuregon.

Tigerishly the Venusian spun about. "Hart!" he exclaimed, his eyes wide with amazement. "You fool! What are you doing here?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Hart quietly, keeping his gun trained steadily on Yuregon's midriff.

Yuregon shrugged defiantly. "Killing me would be the stupidest thing you could do. You won't get your license back, and your first shot would only bring the patrol running. If you had any sense you'd smuggle yourself out of the city as quietly and quickly as possible."

Jason Hart scowled. "Thanks for the advice. When I want some I won't come to you for it. But I'm not here to kill you—not unless I have to, Yuregon. I just want you to stand still while I talk."

"Talk ahead," grunted Yuregon, wiping sweat from his massive face. "Just as long as it doesn't cost me anything. I'm sorry about buying up your license, but you know—"

"I know." Hart's eyes flashed scornfully. "Who's the girl? Not your client—"

Yuregon grinned, and his face resembled a stone gargoyle from a waterspout. "Of course not."

By the streetlight glare Hart could see the girl's eyes flash angrily at the implication.

"I'm Dr. Maythal," she said in a curiously level tone. "And if this is armed robbery you'd do well to think twice before you molest either of us. I'm a Martian, which gives

me a lot of lungpower in this pressurized city. My appeal for help would be heard for—"

Jason Hart met her stare without flinching. "Don't strain yourself. This is a private matter. Whether anyone gets hurt is strictly up to you. A woman ought to know by instinct when a man has his back to the wall. I have nothing left to lose but my life, and that's not worth much to me . . . though there are people who would pay handsomely for the privilege of looking at my corpse. There are two rewards posted for me, dead or alive, so anyone I kill now will be on the house. Do I make myself clear?"

"Better do as he says," urged Yuregon uneasily. "He's in no position to be intimidated by threats." His voice grew more conciliatory. "Why talk to me, Hart?"

"Gossip gets around in the native quarter. I heard you've been hired to take an expedition to the western hunting ranges near the Copper Mountains. Is that true?"

A shifty expression grazed Yuregon's features. "True enough. But what has that to do with you?"

"I want to go along."

Yuregon was startled. "Go along? You must be out of your mind! Even if I gave my consent the law would crack down on you hard."

Jason Hart's eyes narrowed. "It could be managed. You'll be going out by copter, and I could easily enough buy or steal a protective

suit and slip out of the city. You could land in the western deserts and pick me up. There's no law against it, and outside the city I'm still a free man. At least—there's no authority with jurisdiction operating in that territory. It's completely unexplored and unclaimed. Well, Yuregon?"

Yuregon shook his head slowly. "You don't know me very well, do you? If it were an illegal and profitable undertaking I might be tempted. But there's absolutely nothing in it for me. Why should I help you, even if—if things were different?"

"You've owed me a favor for a long time, Yuregon. I saved your life in Dyel-Tyal when the grull cat was mauling you. But I'm not asking this as a favor. If you've a hunting trip planned, I can be useful. I'm the one living man who knows anything at all about the Copper Mountains."

Yuregon laughed harshly. "You know them too well, I'd say—and I doubt if your reputation would be any recommendation. Not this time, pal. Even if I wanted to repay a favor, which I don't, it's not up to me. My client is picking the personnel. If I were foolish enough to mention your name there'd be fuses blown from here to Quanta City."

"Your answer is 'no' then?" Jason Hart asked calmly, fingering the trigger stud of his gun speculatively.

Yuregon hesitated. What he

might have answered will never be known.

Two blinding wedges of light were advancing along the street toward the group. Jason realized at once that no late-operating freight robotruck could have been so brightly illuminated. The vehicle had to be a city patrol car.

All movement seemed startlingly frozen in the glare. Then abruptly the situation came apart. Jason Hart stared in consternation as the girl ran toward the police car, waving her arms and shouting. Screaming in terror, Yuregon flung himself flat on the paving. He writhed and kicked like a maimed slug.

Jason Hart did not shoot. The impulse was in him, but he liked sport with his killing. He did indulge in the luxury of burying a boot-toe in the ample proportions of Yuregon.

Then he fled. Behind him rose the shrill bleat of police whistles, and a siren began its chromatic howling.

II

BY INSTINCT Jason Hart headed toward the old native quarter of the city. Keeping to the lightless, twisting alleyways he quickly managed to lose the sound of pursuit. But he knew that by now all police radios would carry the dangerous news that he had been seen, still alive, within the confines of Cyclo City.

Sooner or later—if he remained

in the modern sector—some wary patrol would spot him, or a prowling car would stumble on him. Then the forces of law and order would converge from all directions. His career would end suddenly in the flare of blaster discharges, or a wild spatter of explosive bullets.

There remained only one refuge, Gooseflesh Alley — that ugly, sprawling city within a city, citadel of cut-throats and other ruthless human scavengers where even the police would be unlikely to follow. If he could reach the area before street-scanners found his trail and the mechanical trackers began to follow it—

The distance was not great. Overhead, like a beacon set to guide him, were the reflected swirls of color above the native part of older Cyclo City which loomed in massive silhouette shortly ahead and a little to the left.

He moved swiftly, and in silence. Mean streets became meaner, more irregular, and dirty. Finally there flashed across his vision the cavorting constellations of weaving radilumes and mobiles of neon-tubing, all designed to lure the curious and unwary, the lonely, frightened and confused. To lure, above all, men who had ceased to be pursuers, and had become the hunted and the lost.

From the maze of tortuous avenues and alleys, Jason Hart picked one at random. After the darkness, so much light was dazzling. Momentarily, he was blinded. Here

were crowds, individuals, febrile emotions, and the stench of an evil centuries old. Here, too, the sharp scent of danger, and of expensive excitement — the shrill sounds of pain, hatred, greed and defiance.

Nightlife in Gooseflesh Alley was crudely strident, and earthy was not the word for it—for South Venus had evolved parallels and tangents to all the social vices of the other planets, and each in turn had remained peculiarly Venusian. Technically, the area was off-limits to all terrestrials and Martians, especially tourists, and for that reason was stealthily patronized by both the venturesome and the depraved.

Jason Hart plunged into the swirl of humanity and not-quite-humanity, and let its turbulent flow carry him down the street. Slowly his eyes adjusted to the glare. He was aware of the surroundings in very much the same way as a savage might be who instinctively evaluates his environment. The gaudy banners and trappings of amusement meant nothing to him.

There was no sign of pursuit, and little fear of it. The symbols of authority were not welcome here, and police came only sporadically in large, armed groups which usually left some casualties and rarely accomplished their mission.

But it was a sanctuary nevertheless—a sanctuary which gave a man a chance to live or die with a

gambler's recklessness . . . as long as his money held out.

One large neon-tube spelled out in luminescent lettering: THE COPPER COCKROACH.

Below the sign an oversized insect of glowing radilume outlines went through obscene gyrations ostensibly inviting the passersby to enter and join in alcoholic and other more unmentionable delights.

Hart turned into the entrance, pausing inside the portal just long enough to glance around, and tentatively finger the cool bulk of his gun. The licensed hunters of South Venus were no strangers to the place, and at the moment it was crowded.

Hart wanted no part of his former associates, and the presence of a familiar countenance might have triggered an immediate row. Fortunately, there were no licensed men present.

Neither were there any vacant tables. Jason Hart solved that problem by hurling a gaunt, large-eared Callistan to the floor and taking over. Such treatment was traditional for Callistans, and was accepted by them as a necessary evil when they were so foolhardy as to mingle with Earthmen and Martians. Jackals who scavenge at a feast of lions can expect little courtesy of their hosts. The Callistan scowled and muttered fiercely for a moment, and then ignominiously departed.

Venusian whiskey has its uses. To Jason Hart it was one of the cheaper and deadlier anaesthetics.

When a man's credit and his profession run out at the same time, he has a right to be morose enough to drink himself to death if he so desires. The disappointments and frustrations of the past year had caused the Earthman to go nearly native, and had built within him resentments against his own kind fully equal to those of the Venusians. He had become a solitary drinker, and now he applied himself to the raw rotgut as thirstily as a tourist.

Hart was no tourist, and at times he seriously wondered if he had ever been an Earthman. Sunless Venus had bleached him, and the ceaseless battle for mere existence had toughened him until his skin resembled Kur-leather, carved and polished by the skilled hands of mutant swamp-men. His muscles, too, had become supple, and his entire body unbelievably resistant to the abrasions of time and weather.

But tough or not, fourteen years of South Venus had made him acquainted with enough savage, untamable frontiers to last him for a dozen lifetimes. At times his longing for an orderly life drove him to welcome even the synthetic civilization of Gooseflesh Alley, and between hunting trips and explorations into the unknown it had become a second home to him. As nearly as any alien can he had made himself known and liked by even the outcast inhabitants.

Fungweed smoke whirled about

him in sticky, acrid layers like noxious vapors stratified above a steaming swamp. Denizens of this particular mental and emotional quicksand were evenly divided at the moment between gabbling tourists and Venusian mutants, some of whom were almost human.

The tourists seemed blithely unaware or heedless of their dangerous surroundings, and the habitués unaware or heedless of the tourists.

At first Jason Hart thought the girl who was weaving her way among the tables toward him was a tourist. But then, almost immediately, doubt entered his mind. Some of the Venusian swampgirls were, superficially at least, as human as Earthwomen.

In the *Copper Cockroach*, it was often necessary to discourage feminine companionship by violence, and Hart did not even look up as the girl stopped abruptly by his table. Such febrile charmers were among the perils of the place, and held little attraction for him. He grunted a curt refusal, and then ignored her to concentrate upon a glass of cloudy, numbing liquor.

"Hart?" she persisted sibilantly. "You are Jason Hart?"

In the many years during which he had haunted the district none of its tragic or monstrous inmates had ever addressed him casually by name, for the Gooseflesh Alley dives are the last refuge of the nameless. Notorious as he might be elsewhere, in the native quarter of Cyclo City Hart was a drop of

murky gray water in a black ocean.

"What do you want?" he asked, raising his head, and steadying with an effort his already blurring vision.

Perception moved sluggishly, but the contrast between the girl and her surroundings was too obvious to miss. Tramp or tourist, she did not belong in a dive where the air was thick with animal-stench, fung-weed smoke, and the scrambled profanity of a dozen worlds.

Whatever her heritage, it required no hunter's eye to appreciate her animal qualities. She was slender, young, and strikingly beautiful, with the contours of her unusual figure thrust forward by her unusual poise. Her body was tantalizingly functional, as nature had intended, and one quick glance would have been enough to start any normal male thinking about the most effective approach to a discussion of elementary biology. Her eyes, curiously enough, looked older than the rest of her, as if they had seen more than could be crowded into a double decade of life.

Jason Hart studied her with rude detachment. A man might not love such a woman, he decided. But she would make an interesting companion.

"A friend told me you sometimes came here," she said, her voice low and purring, like that of a carnivorous cat. "I have been waiting for this opportunity."

Hart laughed grimly. "A friend of yours, perhaps? I have no friends."

"If you are Jason Hart, I can understand that." She smiled at him, with an odd, half-contemptuous curve to her lips. "It was . . . a friend of mine. May I sit down?"

"Suit yourself," Jason grunted. "But don't expect too much."

She eased herself gracefully into the chair opposite him, still maintaining the uneasy alertness of a dangerous animal with its claws only partially sheathed.

Studying her did little to sober Hart, since beauty of the opposite sex is extraordinarily intoxicating in itself. But her presence *did* change the direction of his mood. He was no longer sure he would spend the last of his money on the forbidden hypno-machines.

"I've heard that you're the best of the hunter-guides," she said. "Are you available for hiring?"

A sudden, uncontrollable bitterness surged through Hart. "How recently did you hear that?" he asked.

"A year ago—perhaps more. Does it matter?"

"To most people it would. You are out of date—by just under a year. Are you needing me, or haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" she murmured.

Hart spoke wearily. "I'm disbarred. I've lost my license. You see—game was scarce in the western deserts. I guided a famous Martian hunter into the country beyond. He insisted upon going beyond the Copper Mountains. Unfortunately

something happened there. I don't remember precisely what, because during the last part of the trip I was ill and delirious with fever. I came out alive, but he failed to return. It is widely believed that I ate him."

The girl stared at him. "Did you?"

Hart grunted morosely. "I don't know. But if I was convinced that I didn't it would make no difference on the penalty side. My profession is savagely competitive and nobody *wanted* to believe me. There are always more applicants for hunting licenses than can be certified. Good men simply wait for someone's foot to slip, as mine did.

"I was tried for abandoning my client—with an implied accusation of possible murder and cannibalism. It's unknown country out there. I don't know myself what happened. I just don't care now. Somebody bribed a judge, and there was curious substantiating evidence. I've had it."

"Evidence of what?" She sounded morbidly curious.

Hart shook his head irritably. "Part of a human arm was found in my ruck sack. A gruesomely gnawed arm. Conceivably I was hungry enough. Our food and water ran low. I begged him to leave, but he was like a madman. Then, somehow, we got separated. I looked for him for days after the supplies were gone. I was half-starved, delirious with thirst and fever when I stumbled into a desert outpost. The

trial was brutal. No defense. I just couldn't remember."

"But you could have gone back and looked for him," objected the girl, leaning across the table and refilling his glass.

"Could I?" He shook his head grimly. "I was convicted and sentenced. I got away, but—what chance has a fugitive criminal, with no license, and no money."

"Are you without funds of any kind?"

"Not quite. But I'm too broke to buy sympathy I don't want from you."

She stiffened, her eyes hardening. "My sympathy is not for sale. But drink up, and I'll buy you another. Or you can buy *me* one."

"Do you go with it?" Hart asked bluntly.

Her hand darted toward his cheek. Hart caught her wrist, and twisted it until her eyes glowed with pain and anger. With surprising strength she freed herself. Awkwardly she massaged the bloodless marks left by his fingers. Suddenly she tried again. This time her assault drew blood. Hart knocked down a second blow, and was tempted to hurl her to the floor.

"Get out," he said, restraining his rising anger. "If I want you I'll send for you."

Her tongue showed between white rows of pointed teeth. "You would better improve your manners first," she whispered hoarsely. "I hope your drink poisons you."

She moved quickly back from the table, her body a sensuous flowing within the metallic sheath of her dress. Hart dipped into his pocket for a coin and forced it inside the close-fitting fabric below her throat. It was a platinum twenty sol piece, paper-thin, but a tight fit notwithstanding.

Hart went cold sober as he saw the coin disappear and realized that it was the last of his resources. He would be lucky to get out of the *Copper Cockroach* now with the price of a spare drink for breakfast. In a moment of mad panic he toyed with the idea of recovering his money on the spot, and ignoring the uproar which would be almost certain to follow.

Instead, he turned desperately to his drink, draining it in one swallow. It struck his stomach like a firebolt, and spread in waves of fire throughout his entire body. Gasping, he waited for the effect to subside into a pleasant glowing. But instead the conflagration spread. Fiercer waves of pain and nausea swept over him. His nerves and brain and muscles raged into terrifying incandescence, then burned away to crumbling ash.

Dimly, as he struggled against the intolerable agony, Hart was aware that the girl was still standing over him. She was watching him triumphantly, her twisted smile making her mouth ugly. Satisfied at last, she glanced over her shoulder, and nodded at a pair of burly Venusians near the door.

It was not the first time that Hart had been drugged with the narcotic sap of the flame-vine. But there are some things a man never gets used to. Briefly and hopelessly, he struggled. Then the two ruffians surged toward him, gliding, whirling, expanding, and finally exploding like immense puffs of smoke. Even in his extremity, he wondered why.

It was the last thing he remembered clearly.

III

AWAY from the artificial environments of the domed cities, most of South Venus is a near approach to old-fashioned, terrestrial ideas of Hell. Most of it is dry volcanic desert, lighted fitfully from above and below. The sky overcast is not solid, but the murky, banked-up clouds filter sunlight into an unhealthy glare, and on the ground are numerous hotspots or hellish-glowing pits of molten metals fluorescent from radioactivity. Eternal grayness shifts unsteadily over the landscape, an atmospheric pall stained frequently by volcanic outbursts or colorful electrical displays.

To Jason Hart, it was all depressingly familiar. He had seen it often enough, and had long since grown utterly weary of it. Ignoring the dull, persistent throbbing at his temples he sat up and stared confusedly about him, trying painfully to orientate himself. Linger-

ing after-effects of flame-vine poisoning still clogged his memory and wove curious patterns into the fabric of his thoughts. Concentration was difficult, but he could remember enough of what had happened to account for his sensations—if not to explain his surroundings.

A face danced before his eyes with the ghostly, shimmering unreality of a goblin mask. Like the desert the face was familiar, though he had seen it only once before—on the girl in the *Copper Cockroach*.

Fury raged through him like a Venesian sandstorm. An impulse to violence brought him to his feet, hampered though he was by a cumbersome suit of protective armor, and sent him staggering forward. He tottered and would have fallen had the girl not moved quickly to his side, locked an arm firmly under his shoulder and supported him with surprising strength.

Like the Earthman, she was glad in bulky suiting which did not enhance her physical attractiveness, but was an effective triple-threat protection against hard radiation, toxic vapors and the abrasively violent sandstorms of Venus. A fishbowl helmet of transparent permaplastic enclosed her head, and as she glared coldly at Hart her voice clattered harshly inside his helmet.

"You'll have plenty of time to rage against the inevitable," she said savagely.

Jason Hart agreed heartily. He could recall stories of Earthmen who had vanished inexplicably from their usual haunts, only to be found weeks later far out in the deserts, dead from thirst, starvation or exposure to the deadly radiation from the hotspots. Quite obviously he had been brought into the desert by 'copter, since the region surrounding him was a considerable distance from Cyclo City. Morosely he wondered why anyone would go to so much trouble to dispose of him.

"Why did you bring me here?" he asked. "To abandon me in the open desert without hope of rescue?"

The girl stood back, and studied him. Apparently the paroxysm of nausea and dizziness was passing. She laughed derisively.

"Nothing so simple," she said. "Though it may come to that before I'm through with you. The client you abandoned in the wilderness was my brother, Galan. I'm Cyndar, his twin. I'm sure he must have mentioned me."

Jason Hart measured the girl thoughtfully. "Yes, he did. I don't remember details, but I remember his saying that he had a twin sister. The Martian Diana, he called her—after a goddess of that name in ancient Rome on Earth. A virgin moon-goddess and patron of hunters who loved the chase and hated men. Does that fit?"

"He called me that. What else did he say about me?"

Jason Hart hesitated. His gun was gone, and a serviceable blaster magnetically clipped to the girl's belt looked both deadly and used. Under the circumstances such a woman could be capable of sadistic ingenuity in blood revenge. Possibly her hired goons were still within call and might reappear at any moment.

He spoke cautiously. "Galan implied that there was hatred and bitterness between you. He told me very little, beyond that."

Surprisingly, she laughed. "Not hatred. Bitter rivalry, but not hatred. Galan resented my reputation as a hunter. It was only natural that he should, since his boyhood dream was to outshine me, and he never succeeded. But there was a deep bond and pride of blood between us. He often spoke slightly of my exploits. But he'd have killed anyone else who did."

"We Martians are an old race, and with us family ties are strong. Nothing between Galan and me, will save you—if you killed him, or abandoned him to die. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear. You plan to kill me to avenge Galan—"

"Not yet. I'm not sure that he's dead. As an identical twin I feel that his death could not remain unknown to me. Maybe I'm wrong, for science scoffs at the mystical bond between twins. All I can sense is—a blank wall: If he's alive you're going to take me to him. If he's dead, or in serious trouble

because of you, you will discover that the legends of old Martian tortures are not exaggerated. I want you to tell me what really happened. Start talking."

Hart shrugged bitterly. "Talking won't help. As I told you before, I don't know what happened. Galan may be alive, but I can't take you to him. I'm a hunted criminal and without a license I couldn't even equip an expedition. Besides, the area has been officially closed to hunters for a good many years. It's strange, dangerous country. I'd advise you to forget it."

Her face was ugly. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? My refusal to forget could destroy you."

Hart debated the advisability of playing along with her and hoping for an opportunity to . . . well, reason with her. But like her brother Cynder seemed to have paranoid tendencies which could easily turn homicidal. He remembered Galan too well to hope for much. And the man's uncanny reflexes and skill with weapons gave him little optimism about making a fool's play for Cynder's gun.

"What you do to me doesn't matter very much," he said slowly, gesturing toward the gun. "With that you're asking the questions and writing in your own answers. If you want to organize a rescue party I'll go along and show you the way. You don't have to force my hand. It would be to my advantage to go and find out what actually happened there. If we get back

alive I might just barely be able to clear my record."

"Don't worry," she assured him grimly. "You're going, and I'll be right behind you all the way. Whether you come back alive is entirely up to me."

"Not altogether, as you'll find out," he said. "But you'll need a guide with a license to front for the expedition. There are several who aren't too scrupulous if there's enough money involved. I can give you a list of names. Some of them might enjoy shooting me in the back if you lose your nerve."

"I won't," Cynder promised easily. "And the expedition is all arranged. Without your recommendation I've hired Yuregon. We'll pick you up here on our way. In this desert, there won't be any danger of losing you to the police—before we find Galan. In the meantime, you can sit here and think about what you may have done to my brother."

Leaving Hart, she moved quickly behind the shoulder of a nearby hill. A moment later he heard the roar of a 'copter. He was surprised to realize that she had brought him alone into the desert for the interview. He filed that confirmation of her extreme self-reliance in his memory for possible later use.

He meditated soberly, but not on the past, and there was a curious expression on his face as he watched the 'copter vanish into the writhing mists overhead.

IV

ACCUSTOMED as he was to the continuous nightmare of surface conditions on Venus, Hart found the first stage of the expedition deceptively easy. By 'copter they flew high above ancient sea-beds from which the water had long since boiled away. Far below there unrolled a wasteland of sand and bare rock, tortured by climatic extremes, tectonic fantasies and unpredictable chain reactions in unfamiliar atomic compounds.

At times Hart's Earth heritage seemed immeasurably remote. He seemed as much a part of Venus as the mist-enveloped planet was a part of him. In the beginning the adventure had appealed to him for its own sake. But after twelve years of hunting and exploration only survival and pride of profession had become important to him. Life on Venus was precarious, often uncomfortable, and terrifyingly bleak, requiring constant realistic adjustments to unreal facts.

For Hart, life had become a timeless interval in which one grew accustomed to the biological freaks of mutant vegetation and variant life-forms of rioting creative nature.

The first explorers to reach Venus from Earth had found a planet totally unlike their expectations. The mysterious veil proved to be almost unbroken cloud-canopy, composed of carbon dioxide crystals and minute droplets of resinous compounds in solution. Below the

vapor envelope was a more uncomfortably dense, and often noxious atmosphere containing oxygen in ample quantities supplied by luxuriant plant-growths. Venusian landscapes varied, with some regions densely forested, and others were waterless desert lashed by wind, sand and rad-storms.

A harshly inclined axis, comparatively rapid rotation, and a year of just under 225 Earth-days, gave the whole planet a series of violent seasons, during which life existed at all only by constant adaptation to repeating catastrophe. Little direct sunlight reached the surface, but greenhouse effects trapped high temperatures from solar heat.

For brief winters glaciers of solidified carbon dioxide blanketed an eerie wilderness at one pole and extremes of summer at the other, with the dry-ice cap speedily vaporizing, and a resonance of solar tides causing volcanic uproar, earthquakes and general tectonic instability. Equatorial and temperate zones blended the extremes, with curious inconsistencies in between.

In spite of difficulties, men from the other inhabited planets stubbornly colonized Venus. Beach-head cities were built in semi-protected areas at a boom rate. Exploration of a sort went on continuously and adventurers and exploiters proved adaptable enough to live under even the most intolerable of conditions.

The planet was rich enough in natural resources, and in unnatural

oddities of biological life and death to attract the best and the worst of men. Cities thrived under their permaplastic domes, and the dominion of civilization spread uneasily into the unknown.

In the ninety years—Earth-count—since the founding of Cyclo City, many expeditions had been outfitted there, and had ventured into the blank spaces of the map. But few had started worse than Jason Hart's second journey behind the Copper Mountains.

Personnel had been strictly limited, both by the illegal nature of the venture, and by the size of the 'copter. Beside Cyndar and Jason Hart, there were only three—the woman doctor, Maythal, Yuregon, Tanati, the Araug. Tanati could have been either man or insect from his appearance, but he was actually neither, his ancestral origin being obscurely linked to a life-form unknown except on Venus. By their manner, the other expedition members had made it clear that Hart's status was that of a prisoner.

As the flight continued the deserts were quickly left behind. The terrain lifted, and changed, becoming a checkerboard vista of rolling hillocks, forest-clad and swarming with animal life. Ahead loomed a staggering barrier wall of mountains, thousands of feet in height, with their peaks lost to view in the cloud canopy.

In color, texture and size, the range was unlike any of the more

uniform mountain chains of Earth, and did not in the least resemble the worn polished hills of Mars. It was as if an ocean of molten copper had solidified as it spilled from nature's cauldron into snarled, wirelike masses, polished by wind and sand, and with the mottlings of dark vegetation staining deep crevices in the illusion of metallic corrosion thus conveyed.

No break in the barrier was visible from the air, and no passes had been marked on the official maps. In fact, exploration had barely touched the area, and had turned back when two survey expeditions had met with utter disaster. Only by chance had Jason Hart found a way through the first time.

"This is the place," he told Cyndar. "You can land anywhere near the foot of the mountains."

"Land?" Cyndar exclaimed harshly. "We're not landing. You said my brother was lost on the other side of the mountains."

Cyndar had insisted upon piloting the 'copter herself, and now her eyes were accusing as she turned from the controls to glare at Hart.

"He was," Hart agreed patiently. "But you can't fly over the Copper Mountains. Survey 'copters were reckless enough to try it and their wreckage had to be located by rescue parties on foot. Air currents are treacherous directly over the peaks and magnetic currents constantly stall the engines. You'll wreck your ship if you attempt to fly a thousand miles further."

The girl's face took on an aspect of firmness that reminded Hart painfully of Galan.

"You'd better get it into your head right now that I'm making the decisions," she said scornfully. "Stalling won't help you. *We're flying in*—and if I want your advice I'll ask for it."

Hart said curtly: "Suit yourself."

He had been tempted to appeal to the others against her, but one glance at the frozen faces around him stopped the words on his lips. All of them were aggressively against him, except possibly grotesque Tanati and the Araug's understanding of human matters was too limited to count.

Dr. Maythal, whatever her other qualifications, appeared to think and act with the cold, metallic precision of a surgical instrument and Hart was inclined to suspect some carefully concealed emotional attachment between her and the missing Galan.

As for Yuregon, his resentment of Hart was of such long-standing that his loyalties were always to the highest bidder. Hart realized he could expect no cooperation from any of them. But the habit of personal responsibility died hard in him.

"Better fasten your crash belts," he advised.

Dr. Maythal grunted, and proceeded to ignore him. Yuregon sneered, but was cautious enough to take the advice while discounting its source. Tanati seemed com-

pletely detached, his faceted eyes glittered as blankly as clouded gems. Hart made himself fast with friction straps, for he did not trust the magnetic clips in such an area. There was barely time for even that.

An updraft caught the ship, and shot it upward like a rocket. The 'copter blades flailed wildly, striving for control, and amidst the rising turbulence the frail craft staggered and rocked madly, buffeted by gales from every direction. And as the turbulence increased heavy mists blotted out vision.

Through the jagged rifts Hart glimpsed mad, gyrating flashes of land and sky. One moment the mountains loomed huge and awesomely close, the next they fell away and became obscure again. Then suddenly there was mass movement in the clouds. Outside the 'copter's cabin was a whining snarl of wind-blown sand, grinding away the metallic skin from the framework. Showers of coarse gravel went through the cabin like bullets.

Like a leaf in a millrace, the 'copter was hurled along with the general flow. The entire canopy flowed in a single direction, rushing toward a channel in the high rampart of jagged summits like water streaming toward a tremendous waterfall. Fierce currents hurled the 'copter end over end, sweeping it through churning air-violence to the ridge. There was a terrible moment as tortured metal ground on

saw-tooth rock, and then the ship was falling through a savage tumult.

Time ceased to have meaning, became an eternity of shocks and abrasive contacts. Crash belts snapped like rotten thread, and the ship's occupants tumbled in a confusion of threshing legs, arms and bodies.

Hart fought his way out of the tangle, and managed to wedge himself into the pilot's cradle. Control was no longer possible, for most of the piloting devices were electrical, and none would respond. Also the engines were running only sporadically off-balance. The 'copter fell sickeningly, then caught, or was flipped about on a vagrant gust. After a moment it plunged again. It was riding the elements, completely at their mercy.

More saw-tooth barriers loomed, seeming to tilt at impossible angles. The engines caught feebly, giving an illusion of lift, and the ship tottered like an indecisive suicide on the brink of self-destruction. There was a shock and a vast tearing sound, then an indeterminate period of wild descent like an elevator when the cable snaps.

Hart fought with the controls, trying hopelessly to wrench the plane into sanity, well aware that the ship might tear itself to pieces if he succeeded in gaining control.

At least we are over the mountains, he thought grimly. They were—almost.

He had partially checked the fall and was wrestling the stiff controls

in an effort to level off when they struck. Shattering violence dissolved all sensation into darkness.

V

JASON HART regained consciousness slowly. Around him lay the wreckage of the 'copter. He had a fuzzy, obscure recollection of the impact, the cabin breaking like an eggshell, and then being flung clear. Supplies were scattered in all directions over the mountainside.

Battered, still bleeding from minor injuries, Hart steeled himself for the ordeal of locating his companions. One by one, he found and examined them.

Yuregon was dead, but he was the only fatality. Dr. Maythal lay unconscious, one arm curiously twisted beneath her. It was obviously broken. The Araug, Tanati, had huddled himself into a ball, and was chattering aimlessly, apparently half out of his mind with shock and fear, even though he had been saved by peculiarities of anatomy from physical damage.

Cyndar was not near any of the main portions of wreckage. Before searching further afield for her Hart armed himself. The Copper Mountains were unknown territory even to him, and Venus was full of unpleasant surprises for the unwary.

Hart roused Tanati into a more useful frame of mind and left him to attend the doctor who showed signs of coming painfully to life.

Cyndar was alive. Hart found her pinned under a twisted mass of wreckage in a tangle of rocks less than a dozen yards away. With her back propped comfortably against a slanting boulder, she sat calmly, awaiting discovery. In her gun-hand the blaster rested easily. She aimed at Hart and her hand did not even shake.

"You took a long enough time," she complained.

The hunter laughed. "Times have changed," he told her. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm remarkably adept at saving you from your own folly. Doesn't that give me a certain right to complete freedom of action? A man of experience must, of necessity, take command in a situation like this."

"I'm still giving the orders," she snapped. "Get me out of here."

Jason Hart shook his head. "No, I'm not taking orders. If you still have ideas of killing me, you'd better do it now. It will save both of us a lot of trouble. Frankly, I don't think any of you are worth it. And I'm not too sure I can save you—or myself."

Cyndar lowered the gun, but kept it in her hand.

"Will it take long to get back to Cyclo City?" she asked.

"I've news for you," he said, his eyes on her face. "We're not going back. Not for a while, and quite possibly—not ever. Nobody could make it on foot over those mountains. We'll have to push on, and be grateful if we stay alive

long enough to find some landmarks. There's a way out. It's part pass and part tunnel, and it won't be easy to locate.

"We should have gone in that way and marked a trail, as I did once before. But since we didn't we'll just have to keep searching. It's weird country, with dangerous intangibles you won't understand in every unexplored foot of it. Keep your gun. You may need it. But from now on I'm giving the orders."

Cyndar said nothing, but she did return the gun to its clip.

Swiftly Hart freed her and helped her to her feet, with no injuries except to her suiting and to her dignity.

"You can strip off that protective armor, anyhow," he grunted. "We won't need it in the jungle. The air is safe to breathe, and there's shelter if a storm should come up quickly."

Her eyes glittered angrily. "You lied then? You *do* remember what it was like when you were here with my brother."

"Not . . . everything." Hart's face was grim. "The crash must have jolted my memory. I'm getting flashes—but they're just odds and ends. I still don't know exactly what happened. I didn't actually forget. It was more like a brain-wash—post-hypnotic suggestion. I was supposed to forget *everything*. But apparently it never worked completely. Now it's just starting

to come back. You've heard of the Copperbirds?"

Cyndar shrugged. "I've heard the legends. But nobody believes such creatures really exist."

"Galan believed," Hart said. "He wanted to hunt them. I tried to stop him by stressing the possibility that they might not be legal game. On Venus it's not easy to be sure whether or not a life-form is highly intelligent. Unfortunately, Galan was stubborn. In an outburst of anger he discharged me. But I insisted upon going along with him . . . to stop him from killing anything not legal game. Like you, I had heard of Copperbirds, but I didn't believe they existed."

"Do they?" demanded Cyndar.

"Galan said so. I never saw one—not that I can remember. But I think he may have found them. Quite possibly he was not spared by them—"

"He's dead?"

"I don't know. There's no use talking about it. Perhaps you'll find out for yourself."

Shadows lengthened as they joined the others. An invisible sun dropped toward a vague horizon and from the murk obscuring the peaks above them a powdering of fine crystals settled. Wherever it touched the skin, it burned like hot ashes, for it consisted of minute particles of dry ice. Wind shrieked and howled in the barren gullies like hosts of demons searching for lost souls.

Jason Hart turned Dr. Maythal

over to Cyndar. Then, helped by Tanati, he systematically began salvaging the scattered supplies and sorting them into small packs with maximum survival value. He divided the most vital items into four equal loads and made them up as compactly as possible.

The two women approached him warily. Dr. Maythal seemed badly shaken. She moved unsteadily, and her left arm was roughly splinted with tubing from the wrecked copter. Nevertheless, she determinedly presented herself for her share of the burdens. Hart appraised her critically and shook his head.

"I'll carry yours—for the moment," he told her.

"Don't do me any favors," she said, staring at him coldly.

"I'm not. I'd rather be burdened with your load now than be compelled to carry you later."

"Why not abandon us as you did Galan?" she asked bitterly.

"Don't tempt me," he said angrily. "I've been thinking of it."

The way led downward through tangled ravines. There was little to see. The unsteady light, growing constantly dimmer, distorted distance, and vision was limited in all directions. Mists gathered swiftly around them.

Hours of steady descent took grim toll of their strength but Hart knew that to stay where they were through the night could only lead to disaster. Before them, in an immense hollow, squirmed coils of

living light. Blasts of hot wind laden with moisture and alien perfumes poured upward in rivers of air. During brief rests they talked.

"What are Copperbirds?" asked Dr. Maythal.

Pain and infinite weariness had dulled Hart's memory, and he could only recall fragmentary, teasing symbols of wonder and terror.

"On Earth, long ago, they were called phoenix birds," he said.

VI

THREE days and three nights of the jungle had imposed an almost unendurable strain upon their nerves and brought them to the verge of physical exhaustion. By night, they camped uneasily. By day, they groped blindly amidst a wilderness of giant trees, guided chiefly by Tanati's magnetic directional senses and his remarkable vision, which was abnormally sensitive to polarization of light.

Weaving patterns of light made footing hard to distinguish, and lichens and damp moss made even solid surfaces treacherous. Most of the forest floor was a slippery mass of rotting vegetation.

Game of all kinds was plentiful, but Hart sternly restrained Cyndar's hunting enthusiasm. "We will kill only for food, or in self defense," he insisted.

Cyndar brooded and was rebellious, but in the end they ate only condensed rations from the ship.

Temperatures were so consistent-

ly high that all but the most essential garments had been quickly discarded. The air was breathable, even stimulating in its oxygen-richness, but at times it became almost overpoweringly dense and sickeningly charged with exotic scents. Water seemed plentiful; for the trickling cool streams fed steaming, swampy lowlands and heavy dews dripped from the trees like constant rain. Distances blurred into misty darkness. Progress was slow and difficult.

Each night, Jason Hart posted guards, dividing the dark hour tasks in strict accordance with the strength of each weary member. Dangerous animals lurked in the deep forest, he warned. The guards were armed with pneumatic hunting rifles loaded with explosive slugs which would have stopped a large dinosaur.

Three nights passed without incident, and on the fourth, after a bad day's march, Jason Hart stood the first watch himself. Cyndar, who had not spared herself, quickly fell into a fatigue stupor. Dr. Maythal could neither sleep nor rest, and Hart was disturbed by her troubled breathing and the occasional stirring of her body as she slept.

At intervals, he fed the fire, listened nervously to vague sounds, and tried to remember or imagine what lay ahead. As the jungle's spell had deepened more and more of his previous experiences had come back to him. But the remem-

bered facts were as disturbing as the gaps in his knowledge.

Dr. Maythal threshed about again. Nerving himself, Hart approached her apprehensively. But before he could kneel at her side her voice stopped him.

"What do you want?" she demanded. In the firelight, her eyes glittered strangely.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

"Yes—but it is of no consequence. Fatigue is always painful."

"Are you afraid, then?"

Dr. Maythal stared at him coldly. "Not of you, certainly. Nor of your weapon. Nobody ever solves real problems with a gun. Your problem is in yourself. You're the one who's afraid."

"Yes, I'm afraid," admitted Hart quietly. "With good reason. I'm remembering a little of what happened here. Not everything—but enough. I should never have returned. I should never have let Cyndar bring any of you here. It's no place for a sane human being."

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"What *can* I do now? If I had the means, I'd get drunk."

Dr. Maythal studied the shadows where his face should have been. "Do you remember what happened to Galan?" she asked.

"I never knew," he replied. "We became separated toward the last. Before that we roamed around together, though we were never on very good terms. Galan was in his element—on a kind of hunting

spree. According to my code it was wanton slaughter, but he was still within the outer limits of his permit.

"Finally we strayed into a part of the jungle that was strangely like a landscaped park. A gigantic rock-garden, constructed by titans. I believe it must have been a zoo or game preserve of some vanished race—probably not a human race. It wasn't empty or abandoned. There were guardians, of some kind. The Copperbirds. And there we were the hunted—"

"Imagination," said Dr. Maythal steadily. "Your conscience had begun to torment you."

Jason Hart laughed sardonically. "Thanks for the free diagnosis. But it was real enough. We both could sense it. Call it our hunter's instincts, if you wish. Animals of all known species—and some nightmarish things we never saw clearly—behaved oddly, as if they were being watched-over and herded.

"They hunted us, shrewdly and dangerously, but still according to some organized plan. They seemed to be directed by an alien intelligence that was using them deliberately to track and trick us. For days we lived in terror, hiding out, scavenging like rats in a spaceship for food and water. Finally, I think, we were captured. I remember some nets that glittered. Then everything blurs."

"Galan, too? But you said you were separated—"

"We were. He was not with me.

I remember that I was looking for him at the time. He may have been only in hiding. But I'm sure they got him, sooner or later."

"Galan may have evaded them. After all, he and Cyndar are the best hunters on Mars. The art of the chase has been bred into them for generations. Since war ceased to be profitable, the old Martian aristocrats turned their energies toward hunting. It's a natural outlet for the sadism and killing-urge of the human race. Any psychologist could tell you—"

Hart shrugged. "Then I guess I'm not really a hunter at heart. I came to Venus for adventure. I like danger. I like to gamble for high stakes with my life as forfeit in the game. But I've no sympathy with killing for its own sake. Except for food, or to protect a client I've never killed. I like animals better than people."

"But you've guided other men, and helped them kill—for money."

"That's only an extension of killing for food. I've held down greedy hunters, and kept them from slaughtering illegal game. Some of them won't understand that non-human species are often highly intelligent. On Venus the restricted list is large. I fought with Galan over his obsession about killing a Copperbird. But I needn't have worried. They can take care of themselves."

"And you hope they've taken care of Galan. Isn't that true?"

Hart hesitated. "Maybe it is. I

grew to hate him. And I enjoyed watching the arrogance leave him. Toward the last he was afraid—terribly afraid. Hunting was no longer a joyful experience for him with the situation reversed. I've never seen a man crumble so fast. But you'd probably rather not talk to me about Galan—"

Dr. Maythal said softly: "You're quite mistaken. As his doctor I'm interested. We fell in love, and were to be married. But I broke the engagement because of his hunting mania. I'm a healer, not a killer. I couldn't go on loving a man who was obsessed by a desire to kill—if only in sport. I don't hate him, but it's over—"

"Yet you came along voluntarily. Nobody forced you to come."

"I forced myself. I was afraid he might be injured, or need help. Friendship can be a deep bond. And I remember that you also wanted to come back—before Cyndar forced you. Why?"

Jason Hart answered slowly, choosing his words with care. "It wasn't because of Galan—either way. And not just to clear my name. I feel that I've had it on Venus, and want to leave anyway. Possibly it was because I was afraid, and wanted to face out my fear. I have to go on living with myself."

"That's a good enough reason, if it is true. But you may be lying to yourself. And your motives are probably too mixed with heredity and conditioning to enable you to attempt an impartial analysis even

if you knew the full truth about them. But I'm curious about your fear. Are the 'guardians' so terrible?"

Hart shuddered again. "I don't remember them. I'm still not sure I ever saw one—or would want to. Whatever they are, they are terrible because they're so alien. I remember only the mechanical hypnotizers, and the fear. I didn't escape. They released me. Why they should have done so I don't know.

"At first I thought they were just playing with me, like a cat might play with a mouse, or any small, helpless animal. I went nearly mad with fear. But I kept going while something I couldn't quite see paced me and herded me out of the jungle. Near the mountains I found my old trail, and the way out. That's all."

"Not quite all," Dr. Maythal said professionally. "And not quite true. If you were really afraid you would never have returned. You'd have kept on running, and trying to get away from yourself. You're curious about your Copperbirds—and so am I. And about Galan—"

"We'll know soon enough, unless Tanati has lost his instincts," Hart assured her. "We haven't far to go now. If you have any drugs you'd better take a mild sedative and get your sleep. If we find either Galan or the Copperbirds you'll need your strength."

"You'll need yours," observed the doctor, "if we don't. But I think you have it."

VII

ON THE fifth day, about noon—the precise time was known only to Tanati—they found Galan. Or to be more exact, he found them.

Fleeting sounds and strange light-phantoms accompanied them through the shadowy jungle aisles, while a watery, insubstantial glare filtered down from the dense canopies of greenery overhead. The air seemed to hang in almost visible layers and more than half of the stratified areas seemed to be in violent motion. Streamers of mist whipped through matted foliage, and giant ferns and towering *kolkul* trees gave the forest at times an aspect of nightmare unreality.

To add to their discomfort aromatic steam and choking odors of decay hovered at ground level, and thorn brakes and deadly quicksands blocked the game trails and forced numerous detours.

By a series of terraces they climbed steadily. And mysteriously and by gradual degrees the jungle became more parklike, more artificial, and more landscaped.

On and on they walked until the trees stood yards apart, and they came suddenly into a broad clearing where deep, velvety purple grass grew like a cultivated meadow. Birds screamed overhead, and browsing grass-eaters fled at their approach.

"We'll eat here," decided Hart, breaking open his pack.

The synthetic food concentrates

had become a mere ritual to sustain life, and he could hardly blame Cyndar when she cried out in bitter rebellion. "I want fresh food, and meat. I'm going hunting, and I'll kill the first thing that moves."

Hart watched her silently while she unlimbered the hunting rifle. It was not too bad an idea. All of them were in need of better fare. Dr. Maythal seemed at the ragged end of her resources, and even Cyndar, tough as seasoned leather, was showing the accumulated strains and fatigue. If only he could be sure about the Copperbirds—

"You'd be well-advised not to shoot at anything," he said.

Cyndar's voice was low, but sharp. "Are you afraid your Copperbirds won't like it?"

"I'm simply warning you to avoid drawing attention to us," said Hart seriously.

The underbrush at the jungle's edge rustled violently. From the shadowed depths came a savage chorus of beast voices and a strange wailing cry. Then with startling suddenness, a tiny figure burst from the massed greenery. It ran as if pursued by fiends, zigzagging through the deep grass across the clearing.

"My kill!" screamed Cyndar.

Her rifle swivelled to follow the darting figure. But just as she pressed the trigger stud Jason Hart struck up the gun. Its missile whined a slashing path through the foliage, and far in the distance a startled wild fowl screamed.

"You fool!" gasped Hart. "It's a man."

Ragged, breathless, staggering, the running figure came on. Throwing a desperate glance behind him, he changed direction and headed directly for the group on the far side of the clearing. The three humans recognized him at the same instant.

Cyndar gave a wild, glad cry. Dr. Maythal drew in her breath painfully. Hart swore vividly, and took a swift step forward.

"Galan," choked Cyndar.

Galan tried to stop and stumbled. Both women ran forward. Cyndar caught her brother in her arms as he fell. Galan blinked, staring blankly up at her. Words bubbled meaninglessly from his cracked and swollen lips. He made a wild snatch at Cyndar's rifle. Evading his gesture, she eased him gently toward the doctor, her face drained of all color.

"I've found him," she whispered. "Nothing else matters. I've found my brother!"

Hart stared watchfully at the base of the green cliffs of jungle. In tight-lipped silence Cyndar joined him, her gun ready. A chorus of uncanny howls echoed in the clearing, and again came the strange cry.

"They won't dare track him now," breathed Cyndar.

"I wouldn't count on that," warned Hart.

Cyndar's features hardened. "Let them come."

They came. A savage pack of

wolf-like animals burst with a savage baying from the sheltering brush. They spread out, weaving their way through the grass, crouching low. Behind them a vague figure halted just beyond range of Hart's vision.

Cyndar's pneumatic rifle coughed with metallic harshness. One beast reared up, then another. She kept shooting long after the hunting animals retired to a hoarse call from their overseer. Explosive slugs lashed the jungle where the hunters had vanished. Half a dozen wolf-like bodies thrashed into stillness in the deep grass.

"You can stop shooting now," Hart told her. "They've gone."

Cyndar turned wild eyes toward him. She swung her rifle about and aimed it at Hart's chest.

"Drop your gun," she ordered.

Wearily Hart complied.

"I'm giving orders again," she said. "How do you like it? You know who or what was hunting Galan. I'm waiting for you to tell me."

Jason Hart shook his head. "You wouldn't believe me—so I'd rather you found out for yourself. Or ask him."

Cyndar was in a trigger-happy mood. "Galan was unarmed . . . and hunted. You left him like that."

"I had no gun to give him," Hart reminded her gently. "And it wouldn't have mattered, believe me."

"I don't believe anything you say. If Galan has suffered—"

Hart glanced sardonically at the fugitive. "Galan's all right. He's just tired and scared half to death. I could remind you that you'd have shot him yourself if I hadn't stopped you."

Cyndar moved uneasily to her brother, ignoring Hart completely. She knelt by his side, and they embraced in silence. There were tears in her eyes, and Galan seemed deeply moved too.

"There's nothing wrong with him," repeated Hart irritably.

"I'll be the judge of that," said Dr. Maythal, her manner coldly professional. "Superficially, he seems in good health—only strained and tired, with some mental confusion. I'll need a more thorough examination to be certain, of course."

"Keep it safe," advised Hart. "You doctors always trim your orbits both ways, and keep a sky-anchor moonward, don't you. Why not ask your patient how he feels?"

Galan sat up suddenly, thrusting Dr. Maythal rudely away from him. "I'll be all right," he said hoarsely. He got shakily to his feet. Tottering, he made a wild lunge at Hart, who evaded him easily.

"Tell them what was hunting you," Hart said.

A complex of guilt, fear and hatred turned into a sly expression on Galan's face. "I—I don't remember," he said weakly.

"They'll find out anyhow," Hart said grimly.

Galan's finger stabbed toward Hart. "You, you!" he screamed, his voice shrill. "You're to blame. You tricked me here—into their hands. Kill him, Cyndar. Kill him before he tricks you, too. Or let me!"

Again Galan snatched at his sister's rifle. This time, he got it in his hands. He flourished the weapon wildly. Abruptly the situation took a tragic turn. Galan was not aiming, not even at Jason Hart. Certainly not at Tanati. But the Araug took fright. With a wordless scream, Tanati fled. His body was a moving pattern against the purple grass. Swiftly Galan raised the gun, took aim, and fired.

Tanati flung both arms skyward, skidded into the grass, and lay curled up in odd resemblance to a sand-burr. He was dead before his body touched the ground.

"Get Hart's gun," Galan ordered Cyndar. "We'll have to kill him too, now. We'll get out all right. I can find the trail. But we can't have him giving evidence."

"That's right," said Hart. "Evidence of murder. But I don't think you'll ever stand trial for it in Cyclo City."

Cyndar picked Hart's gun from the grass and covered him with it. She was pale, but outwardly in complete command of herself. Galan's recovery had been swift and totally unexpected. With the killing, all of his mental confusion

and curious weakness had vanished, and the old arrogance was once more in the ascendant.

"Do you want to kill him?" asked Cyndar. "Or shall I?"

Galan turned and gestured toward Dr. Maythal. "Let her do it," he said shrewdly. "If she relieves us of that burden it will make a better story when she is questioned by the authorities."

The doctor was staring at the pair in horror, as if seeing them in true perspective for the first time. Hart heard her swift, harsh intake of breath.

"You'd better do as they say," he advised grimly. "They'll kill you too if you don't."

Dr. Maythal straightened, her eyes darting to the gun in Cyndar's clasp. "They'll have to then," she said simply. "I'm a healer, not a killer."

"Whose side are you on?" Galan demanded.

"Neither side — until now." Quietly she ranged herself beside Jason Hart. She eyed the twins with sharp curiosity. "Which one of you will kill me?"

A brief silence fell. Then Galan said: "I will—if you force it. I think I've always wanted to kill you."

"Mental patients often feel like that about their doctors," Dr. Maythal said.

Galan flinched as the barbed shaft struck home. He raised his gun and nodded to Cyndar.

"Aren't you wasting good ma-

terial?" Hart asked easily. "You've always wanted subconsciously to hunt a man. All hunters do. Game animals, at best, are just a substitute. You two claim to be hunters. Why not turn us loose, give us a head start and have the sport of hunting us down. It will greatly heighten your pleasure—unless you are afraid I'll outsmart you."

Galan tightened his lips. A chill gleam came and went in his eyes.

Cyndar nodded briskly. "It's what I intended for you—after I found Galan," she said. Maythal, it's not too late. You can still change your mind. And you can't help him by making your own death certain."

Unflinching, Dr. Maythal shook her head. "I don't like either of you well enough to share your guilty world."

Cyndar shrugged. "We'll give you a half-hour start. Together or alone. A knife and a rope, if you want. But no guns."

Jason Hart accepted the knife and rope. Silently the jungle enveloped them.

VIII

TIME seemed to lose its meaning. Staying close together, the pair fled doggedly through the forest gloom. Twice the girl stumbled and would have fallen had Hart not instantly caught her. A third time they both slipped on a patch of treacherous mold, and went sliding down a long incline into a foulness of

marshland. Their clothing was ripped to shreds by clawing thorns as they fought their way up out of the quagmire.

Following game trails gave them more speed, but it had its disadvantages. The trails wound hopelessly in mazes, without direction. At short intervals Hart paused to line up massive tree-trunks, convinced that by so doing he could avoid circling back toward the pursuers, and sharply increase his chances of outwitting them.

Curiously enough, though he found no landmarks, he no longer felt completely lost. Confidence had returned to him. There was a stimulation in just knowing that there was a wild, deadly game of hide and seek afoot. Poorly armed, he still had a chance, and the sharp sense of risk kept him ceaselessly alert, with constant vigilance his weapon of choice.

Time was running out, of course. Unburdened by a need for caution Galan and Cyndar could move far more rapidly than he. But there was the possibility that they would not hurry the game and shorten their pleasure in the chase. But whether they drove themselves or not he could count on nothing but his brain and skill and courage.

Uncomplaining, Dr. Maythal kept up the killing pace as long as she could. But finally either her spirit or her strength gave out. She drew Hart to the edge of the trail, leaned back against a tree and looked at him pleadingly.

"Without me, you might get away," she murmured.

Hart stared at her. "Do you think I'd go on, and leave you here?"

"I still can't believe they'd kill me," she protested.

"Then you're a greater fool than I thought," Hart said, half angrily.

Dr. Maythal shook her head.

"I'm not, really. I know they'll kill me. But without me you might have a slight chance to elude them. They're like superb killing animals, bred for the chase. You can't even confuse the trail. They'll follow by instinct alone. I know them better than you do. You must believe me."

Hart nodded gravely. "I know them well enough. I saw Galan at work on that first expedition. He was the finest natural tracker I've ever seen. Overtrained, perhaps—a bit too eager. But the best."

"You're heading toward some kind of sanctuary, aren't you?" she asked shrewdly. "Do you think the Copperbirds will protect us?"

"It's not likely. They have a low opinion of the human race—after watching Galan's indiscriminate slaughter and the killing we had to do when we were being hunted. No, I don't expect any *direct* help from them. But if we can reach their lair we may be safe. Galan fears them. He may not dare follow us—all the way."

"If Galan fears them, why don't you?" she asked.

"Maybe I do. I dread going back, but it's our only chance. I think

I lost some of my fear when you stood up to them. You were terrified, but something in you made you defy them. I guess it's like that with me. We're going to the lair—if I can find the way."

"You've remembered more about the Copperbirds," she said.

"A little. But nothing that cheers me up. I remember an odd square stone building which seemed older than time. I never saw them, actually. But there were alien minds probing mine, making telepathic and hypnotic contact, and I learned something of their purpose. They're living beings, highly intelligent, and synthetic in origin. They're not metallic robots, however. Someone put them here to guard the preserve, to maintain the natural balances among the animals.

"If too many animals of one kind die, or are killed off, they create new ones from the old by taking microscopic germ-cells from the scar tissue on the newly dead beast and growing a complete new organism from it. I've heard of such a process, back on Earth."

"So have I," agreed Dr. Maythal. "Earth scientists as far back as the Twentieth Century studied the ability of lizards and creatures of the sea to replace lost limbs and learned to duplicate that process on a startling scale. In vats, they duplicated complete adult humans, with the identical personalities and heredity of the original. Even the talents were identical. But religious prejudice forced a stop to the ex-

periments, and the knowledge was lost."

"The Copperbirds, or their long-vanished masters, have carried the process a step further," Hart said. "Everything is reproduced, even the memories and sense of identity. Only certain physical defects or the marks of injuries are left out. I know. Galan killed me. When I was captured, he stalked my captors and put a bullet into me while I still struggled in the nets.

"It was an explosive bullet. I'd like to think it was a mercy killing, but I know Galan too well. He hated me too much for that. When the Copperbirds reconstructed me, they left out my previous hunting scars."

Jason Hart fell silent, brooding. His eyes were tragic, and Dr. Maythal sensed the acuteness of his horror.

"The religious objections to the experiments on Earth had to do with the soul," she said. "Is that what's worrying you?"

Hart laughed uneasily. "I have given it some thought. But there's more to it than that. I keep wondering if I'm *me*—or someone else. Everything about me seems unchanged. I think and feel just as I did before. But I also feel curiously like a trespasser, a stranger in a familiar world, in some respects as alien as the Copperbirds."

"What was really hunting Galan?" she asked.

"Another Galan. The Copperbirds have an odd sense of justice.

Poetic justice, in a sense. Galan lives only to hunt and kill. So they gratify his strongest impulses. One of him always hunts and kills the other. Then the loser is reconstructed, given a gun and the hunting pack, and the game goes on again. *With the roles reversed.*"

"It's . . . horrible," murmured Dr. Maythal.

"It's a sample of their unusual penology. The Birds rule this jungle according to a brutal code, but their standards differ from any human values I've ever encountered."

"I'm not sure that I like your sanctuary," the girl said. "But if we're going anywhere, I'm rested now."

Jason Hart smiled at her. "No matter, doctor. But we don't want to spoil the game."

The forest seemed to march with them, its gigantic tree-trunks looming out of the dimness like the legs of giants. Equally enormous ferns stabbed upward until their summits were lost in a blinding canopy of sky. Foliage and branches intermingled high overhead like the vaulted roof of a titanic cathedral, with bright banners of mist draping the arches from vestibule to nave.

Suddenly Hart sighted a deep burn-mark on the rough bark of one forest monster. Shouting hoarsely, he broke into a run.

The tree was a giant among the giants. Its tangled roots probed into the ground like sprawling tentacles, and its trunk was house-size.

Kneeling, Hart scabbled at the

dirt packed around the roots, first loosening soil with his knife, and then digging it out with frantic fingers. Swiftly he uncovered a sliding door of corrosion-proof metal. His fingers jabbed rhythmically at the alien scrolls. As the door slid smoothly aside he motioned the girl into the opening and quickly followed her.

They found themselves in total darkness. Clasp ing Dr. Maythal's hand Hart groped in the hollow interior and found a steep, spiraling ramp leading upward. They climbed hastily, their shoulders almost touching. They climbed for an incredible time, with Hart feeling for every step, and leading the girl as a veteran blind man might have led a companion newly blind. Gasping for breath, she let him guide her up the endless spirals cut into the interior walls of the hollow tree.

After what seemed an eternity, he halted. Leaving her in the darkness, he briefly explored an archway beyond. She waited with dread misgivings until he returned.

"It's all right, doctor," he said. "I've found the door to the outside."

"Stop calling me 'doctor,'" she pleaded.

In the darkness Jason Hart laughed. "You're being a little unreasonable. I don't even know your first name."

"Yes you do," she said. "It's the same as my last name. Maythal-Maythal. On Earth it would sound

silly, I know. But it's the custom in my part of Mars."

IX

HART led Maythal through a smaller opening, then horizontally for a distance of perhaps thirty yards. The sides and roof of the tunnel crowded in upon them and they had to move at a half-crouch.

"I was lost for three days inside a tree like this," observed Hart. "But don't worry, Maythal. I'm sure of the way now. Watch your head."

He dropped her hand abruptly and she could hear him grunting beside her in the darkness. Then a wedge of blinding brilliance broke through from above as a trapdoor responded to the heaving of his shoulders. Hart climbed out and extended a hand to help her. He caught her firmly in his arms and held on like grim death until her eyes grew accustomed to the glare.

The ground was barely visible four hundred feet below. A cry burst from her tight lips, and ripples of nausea went through her as she stared down. They were probably halfway up the tree, but the portion above their heads was invisible in the glare. The limb on which they stood was at least eight feet in diameter and it seemed as solid as a rock. But to Maythal it also seemed as insubstantial as a cloud, for like most Martians she suffered from acrophobia.

"Will you be all right?" asked Hart.

She nodded numbly. "Maybe I'll get used to it. What do we do now?"

"We go through the trees," he told her.

The rough bark with its many deep ridges did not appear to retard Hart as he ventured resolutely across it.

Nerving herself, Maythal followed him along the perilous bridge of the branch. The transfers from one overlying limb to another were hair-raising to her, although Hart seemed to enjoy traveling through the leafy avenues of the trees.

He moved along great limbs and launched himself across yawning abysses with reckless abandon. But he managed to be always at hand and ready when Maythal needed help. Without his assistance and moral support, she could not have forced herself to move at such heights.

"Do you think they will follow us here?" asked Maythal.

"Of course. Galan knows the trees better than I do. But we've gained a little time, and tracking us now will be a slower task. I'm hoping to find some place where I can break down the tree-bridges after we've crossed. That would delay them, and make it more difficult for them to pick up our trail again."

Tremblingly she kept on. She did not dare to look down, but she

was equally fearful of closing her eyes. She did not need to be told that a second's hesitation or unsureness could mean missed footing and a fearful plunge to the ground.

"I'm not afraid of being killed," she said. "It's the fear of falling from a great height that upsets me."

"You're doing wonderfully," Hart assured her. "Just don't look down. Keep your eyes on the path ahead."

"I'll . . . try."

For half an hour she stayed with him, gritting her teeth and trying to avoid thinking of the gulfs below. But her strength was running out rapidly. Her last fall on the ground had shaken her injured arm badly, loosening the splints and putting an added strain on the fracture. Her pain was extreme, but she knew that re-splinting the arm would take too much precious time. A numbing ache spread upward into her shoulder, and at intervals her brain reeled with spasms of dizziness.

One such moment occurred during a difficult passage. She leaped lightly from a branch to the next, her heart pumping desperately. As her feet touched the firm bark, she balanced precariously. Relief surged through her, followed by a seeping blackness. She threw out her hands to Hart, and a cry of terror rose to her lips as she felt her knees buckling.

Hart sprang to catch her, but the

splinted arm hindered his grasp. Her faintness passed as quickly as it came. But she was already too far gone to recover her footing. She sprawled, and started sliding. With only one arm she could not save herself. Sick with panic, she realized that she was sliding completely over the edge. Then suddenly, she was falling, falling rapidly, and the dense air was whistling in her ears.

She struck a heavy branch, rebounded, and—a miracle happened. Rough foliage seemed to reach up and enfold her, incredibly cushioning her fall, cradling her, and swaying with her weight.

Jason Hart's face appeared amidst the trembling branches far above. He stared anxiously down at her, his shoulders dark against the glare.

"Don't move," he cautioned. "I'll be right down."

An eternity seemed to pass before he reached her. With shaking hands, he roped her securely to himself and edged her along the frail limb to safety near the massive trunk.

"You should have lowered the rope and pulled me up," she said, when she could speak again without shuddering.

"It wouldn't reach."

"Can we get back up to the path?"

"No," Hart replied. "You'd never make it. I'll have to lower you from branch to branch. We'll go from here on the ground."

"You could get back there with-

out me," she said. "You might even get away from them."

Hart remained silent.

"Please save yourself," she begged. "Leave me here, and go on."

"Not while I live."

"You're crazy," she said, half angrily. "It's not your fault I'm here. I'm no responsibility of yours."

"I've never been in love before," Hart said harshly. "So shut up and let me enjoy it."

"You are crazy."

Both of them laughed, with a touch of hysteria in their voices.

"I pick a wonderful time and place, don't I?" Hart exclaimed.

"At least, with a doctor, I won't have to worry about the clinical aspects of romance."

Branch by branch, he lowered her to the ground. At the base of the great tree Maythal sank gratefully to her knees and put her good hand into the moist dirt.

"I never liked boys who wanted to climb trees," she observed.

Hart grinned at her. "Remind me to kiss you when I'm less rushed."

On foot they fled through dim aisles beneath the great trees.

The game trail wound aimlessly, and with his knife, Hart chopped pathways through tangled brush to a new trail. Except for the water which dripped like musical rain from the foliage overhead there was silence and a feeling of vastness. Winds moaned invisibly in the heights, but no echo of their

fury reached the forest floor. Insects droned, but their minute wing-sounds were only part of the greater silence.

It was Hart's hunter's instinct that warned him. Nervously he glanced at their backtrail, his lips set in tight lines. From somewhere remotely behind came the faint howling of a hunting pack.

Hart stopped and listened, trying to evaluate distance by the sound. "I had forgotten about the other Galan," he said. "This may be a three-way chase."

"Is he after us, too?" Maythal's hand had tightened on his arm. "Is he?"

"It's impossible to guess," Hart said. "He may complicate the game for them as well as for us. Do you want to rest?"

"No, keep going," she urged. "I don't want to stand and wait to be killed."

They fled again. By scarcely audible sounds, and by senses that have no name in civilized society Jason Hart knew that the game was running out. The stalkers were not far behind, and they were catching up swiftly. Abruptly the jungle thinned and an immense sloping boulder-strewn field loomed directly ahead. In grim desperation they hurried toward it.

"We almost made it," Hart gasped. "The square stone building I told you about is just beyond—in the center of the highest terrace. But we can hide out in these rocks. They won't get a clear shot at us,

and will have to come in and search the field boulder by boulder. I still have the knife."

Wordlessly, she stared at him.

Then, in a terrible, frozen moment, it was all over.

The missiles struck before the metallic whir of pneumatic rifles echoed in the game path behind them. Hart saw the bullet tear into his companion's body and explode, taking her from him. At the same instant metal ripped into his chest, and became a spreading flower of fiery pain that transported him with savage violence into cool darkness. Mind and memory and identity went with him into the black unknown.

X

JASON HART's face swam mistily before Maythal's startled vision.

Behind him hovered something else—something like a mask of hammered copper, but faintly luminous. There was a helmet-like carapace upon a head both beautiful and hideous. Her instincts and her mental balance wavered with odd shock as she became aware of the rest of the creature.

It was serpent-like, but not a snake. Birdlike, but not a bird. Instead of scales or feathers, thin hairlike spines stood straight up from its metallically gleaming skin, and except for the sentience of its face it might have been a lifeless image or grotesque artwork cast in virgin copper.

Even the batlike wings were suggestive of thin, overlapping strips of metallic foil which had been first crumpled and then straightened out and neatly folded by a craftsman with a realistic objective in mind.

It was immobile, voiceless, but somehow Maythal was aware of its thoughts and emotions. So alien were those thoughts that there were no standards of comparison by which they could be judged or weighed. She sensed age, cultured strangeness, and even a vague distaste. But that was all.

"This is Sy-ann," said Jason Hart. "He is the last of his kind."

"I know," murmured Maythal. "Some of his thoughts are reaching into my mind."

"How is your arm?" asked Hart.

Maythal sat up quickly, her fingers darting to her shoulder. "It's whole again and the pain is gone!" she exclaimed. "But this is incredible—"

Maythal's flow of words stopped as she sensed movement within her mind, as if thought-tentacles probed gently from the Copperbird into her innermost self. There was no general exchange of deep-memory stores or major idea-patterns, only a swift intermingling of surface thoughts more fluid and direct than the most intimate conversation. There was a thrust of questioning and answering without conscious volition, and a mystical evaluation of her mind and motives by a mature, though alien, judgment.

But no such exchange can be other than mutual. Even during the slight contact Maythal acquired a profound understanding of Sy-ann and his people, their ancient mission and the decay of a system. Within herself, she responded to an infinite sadness and a passionless devotion to duty.

"Long ago, someone brought them from the stars into our solar system," said Jason Hart. "They were established in outposts like this on the embryo worlds that became our planets. Even they have forgotten how or why. For many generations the Copperbirds on Venus had lost contact with their fellows on other planets. Here, all but Sy-ann were killed by a terrible accident. Now, even he is very old—and dying. Twice every thousand Earth-years, Copperbirds must be reconstructed and their old bodies burned. But there is none now to perform this service for Sy-ann."

"Why couldn't we?" demanded Maythal. "It would be slight enough payment for what he has done for us."

Again, the darting tentacles of thought. Again, the strange intermingling, the surging hope.

"You could try," Hart said. "It may hardly be worth the effort. Galan and Cyndar have been trying to break into the station for hours. Sy-ann overloaded his power system when he brought us back to life. The force fields are breaking down, and are now almost useless.

"There's nothing we or Sy-ann

can do to stop them. It looks as if Galan will have his opportunity to kill his Copperbird, the last one in existence. If you use the power needed to rebuild Sy-ann, even if he can instruct you in the process, we'll lose the last protection we have."

Maythal's face set stubbornly. "I'd like to try. Why don't you have a look at the power plant, while—while our friend is instructing me? Maybe you can do something. It will be better than just standing around waiting."

"That's a good idea," Hart agreed.

Maythal had been lying on a molded metallic dais. She stood up and looked about her. The interior space was tremendous. Glareless light flooded down from invisible sources, and there were jumbles of curious instruments, laboratory benches, culture vats, all blended into scientifically and artistically satisfying organization.

Entranced, Maythal looked swiftly around, then down again at her perfect arm. Emotion stirred in her. Sy-ann's mind tentacles probed into her consciousness with a surgeon's touch. Abstract but obvious symbols flowed from him to her.

Hart spoke, putting the symbols into words. "If knowledge such as this should ever find its way to Earth it would revolutionize medicine and surgery. Think what it could mean for victims of accidents, and the tragically deformed. I wish I knew how he snatched us away

from Cyndar and Galan. He tried to tell me but I'm too thick-headed to understand.

"Something about Copperbirds being able to flit back and forth through extra dimensions, which is why they're so rarely seen—except as glimmerings of light, or as flashes reflected from moving surfaces of metal. I'll see what can be done about the power plant, but if you need me, I'll be within call."

As Hart left them, Sy-ann moved for the first time. She was not sure how he moved, but suddenly he was close by. Beneath his great head were nests of tentacles, four to each side, giving him a weird resemblance to an ancient Hindu goddess.

A pair of tentacles reached out and fixed themselves to her temples. A stream of clear, precise instructions flowed into her brain, filling her mind and memory with the basics of a new science of embryology. Like an automaton, or a person under hypnosis, she moved to her strange new task, though surgical instruments and controls obviously designed for tentacles puzzled her briefly.

Time moved with impossible slowness for her. Life took form under her hands. Alien life. But life, newly created.

When Jason Hart returned he found her sobbing on the dais, her body huddled together, sobbing and writhing convulsively. Horror-struck, he gathered her into his arms.

"You failed?" His eyes searched the room for the alien.

Maythal stirred in his arms, her eyes bright through a film of tears.

"No, I succeeded. Sy-ann has gone—somewhere. There's a part of it that's like a ritual. I think he's . . . praying to his own gods. I got through it, but the thing is awesome. It frightened me, that's all."

"I'm glad you got somewhere," said Hart. "I didn't. The power plant is hopeless. Maybe Sy-ann can include a prayer for us to his gods. That last power-drain really fixed things. There's a generator there with magnetic bearings, practically frictionless, the most wonderful thing I ever saw. But all the leads are melted and fused. Sy-ann might fix it, but not in time. Whenever Galan and Cyndar try again, they'll come right through the force-field barriers. We can expect them at any moment!"

"But Sy-ann—"

Jason Hart interrupted her gently. "I should have told you, I guess. Before you came back to life, we had quite a talk. He's no miracle-worker, just a minor technician. Like us he has limitations. Actually, there's not much he can do about Cyndar and Galan—not while they're alive and out of his hands. He could turn the beasts on them, perhaps. But I don't think he will. They'd kill too many."

"You're not giving up now? Not after . . . everything?"

He shook his head. "No, May-

thal. We can try running some more, if we can win free of this building and somehow manage to circle around behind Cyndar and Galan. Do you feel up to trying it?"

She looked at him and nodded.

XI

DRIFTING mists helped conceal them as they left the shelter of the building and slipped across open fields. The obscurity was a mixed blessing, for it prevented Hart from locating the stalkers and avoiding them. Without discovery, they reached a twisting ravine and followed it for a full mile.

The ravine descended sharply and opened onto the sloping boulder field, where shattered replicas of their living bodies still lay sprawled on the lower rocks.

Hart studiously avoided the area and made sure that Maythal's attention would not stray to the spot, for he feared that seeing her own corpse might prove too great a shock after the strains she had already endured. With infinite care, he worked their way down the steep descent, taking advantage of the concealing shadows cast by every rock and hollow.

He knew that before long Cyndar and her brother would grow impatient, force their way into the building and find that their quarry had fled. Then the chase would resume with deadly overtones.

Escape was at best a slim chance.

The distance to the mountains, or even the nearest desert outpost was too great for the hunted pair, especially with one a tyro at trailcraft.

There could be only one end. Somewhere along the trail he and Maythal would be overtaken. In the meantime, it was pleasant to be alive, and to be with her. Hart intended to prolong the adventure until all hope had ebbed.

At last, the jungle closed around them, and they continued on swiftly through the maze, from one torturous game trail to another. This time there were no halts for rest, or other delays. For Maythal's sake Hart did not take to the trees where travel would have been faster. But he urged her continuously and Maythal did not complain nor delay him.

It was a long flight, without breaks, without incident. To Hart, it was a final game with fate, a last heart-bursting effort to save his life and the life of the woman he loved.

To Maythal, it was an idyl. The forgotten jungles of an unknown part of Venus became Paradise. An exotic, unexplored Paradise that she could share with her man. If their life together was to be short let it be all the sweeter for that. She was happy.

Like any Paradise, it existed only in the emotions and hopes of the people involved. And like all idyls, it came to an end.

Hart's hunter's instinct remained alert, tuned to the highest pitch. He sensed the pursuit long before it drew close. He considered working out traps and deadfalls, but knew that it would only hasten the inevitable. Cyndar and Galan were too skilled and too wary to be easily tricked.

He knew there was no hope, but kept his thoughts to himself.

Maythal turned suddenly, her face deathly pale. "*They're coming?*"

Hart nodded grimly. "Yes. They're not far behind now."

They floundered into a clearing, and crossed over to the far side. Maythal stopped.

"This is far enough," she gasped out. "What's a few miles or a few more minutes? They're not worth the extra breath."

Hart put his arm around her. They faced the jungle across the clearing and waited.

The stalkers were coming on carelessly, not worrying in the least about warning their quarry. They came with confidence, with a trampling and a clatter that must have terrified all game in the area.

But there was another sound—the distant baying of the hunting pack. It was not too far off, and it was approaching rapidly from another direction.

Startled, Jason Hart listened. The blood pounded in his ears, but he strained to hear, to judge with accuracy the distance and direction of the alarming new sounds.

Quite suddenly, the Copperbird stood beside them.

"Sy-ann!" exclaimed Hart and Maythal in one voice.

The alien's mind answered their unspoken question. In symbols and abstracts it seemed to speak to them. *I did not come to interfere. I cannot. The law is greater than I am, and each must work out his own cycle. Pain or pleasure must be paid for, and Justice is infinite. I came to say my farewell, for I will not see you again. I can only observe and be grateful to you for the gift of continuing life.*

Where the alien had been was a flickering ghost of light, an eery glimmering that circled slowly upward and vanished in the mists and shadows of tree foliage.

The thrashing of brush drew closer, and for an instant as brief as a dropped heartbeat the cry of the hunting pack hung against a stillness of jungle air.

The clearing seemed in that instant like a huge stage, with the great trees a nightmare forest projecting from the wings. The next moment, as if on cue, Cyndar and Galan emerged into the open. Slowly their rifles swung upward.

Hart froze, awaiting the shock, the horror of seeing Maythal blasted before his eyes.

From another quarter of the jungle more figures appeared. The howling pack of doglike beasts streamed into the clearing. After them, incredibly—

Another Galan . . .

Cyndar stood rigid. Only her head moved. Dazedly, in shock, she stared from one image of her brother to the other. Her mouth dropped open.

The twins had become triplets. Horror became a visible emotion.

At the same instant, the two Galans flung up their guns. Both weapons discharged. The blasts were simultaneous . . . and both men went down.

Maythal covered her eyes, screaming. Cyndar dropped her gun.

Long afterward, Jason Hart remembered the incident like an illusion done with mirrors.

It was over . . . and Maythal was warm and safe in Jason's arms.

They took a mindless, wooden Cyndar home with them.

It was a long journey back to the mountains, through the tunnel, across the desert to the first outpost. Without their protective armor, they would be at the mercy of either sandstorms or radiation. But, somehow, he thought they would be lucky.

As they left the jungle behind, his eyes lingered fondly on Maythal. He remembered ironically that once she had seemed to him as inhuman and emotionless as a surgical instrument. He watched her tenderness as she led the childlike Cyndar and cared for her.

"Aren't you afraid of the journey back?" he asked.

Maythal met his eyes. "Not with you along," she said.

second sight

by . . . Alan E. Nourse

(Note: The following excerpts from Amy Ballantine's journal have never actually been written down before at any time. Her account of impressions and events has been kept in organized fashion in her mind for at least nine years (even she is not certain when she started), but it must be understood that certain inaccuracies in transcription could not possibly be avoided in the excerpting attempted here . . .

The Editor.)

Amy was too proud of her strange, bright gifts to be shaken by the fear in the eyes of others. But a woman apart needs understanding.

TUESDAY, 16 MAY. Lambert got back from Boston about two this afternoon. He was tired—I don't think I've ever seen Lambert so tired. But there was more than just exhaustion in the way he looked and acted. What was it? Anger, frustration? I couldn't tell for sure. It seemed more like *defeat* than anything else. And he went straight from the 'copter to his office without stopping off at the lab at all.

But it's good to have him back! Not that I haven't had a good rest. Charlie Dakin took over the reins for the week, of course, but Dakin

Once in a dream we had a science fantasy anthology to edit overnight. The great presses were roaring, the ink was flying, and a copy boy was shouting: "Only the best! Hurry! The fifteen top stories from FANTASTIC UNIVERSE!" We rapped on our portfolio and out trooped the most resplendent of characters, in single and double file, and with the imperishable head surgeon of Alan Nourse's GRAND ROUNDS leading the parade, in drum major regalia. We're not dreaming now, but we're just as enthusiastic about this, his newest story.

is a nothing, poor man. So easy to twist around and get all confused that I just didn't do *anything* all week. With Lambert back I'll have to get down to the grind again. Still, I'm glad he's here. I never dreamed I'd miss him so, just for a week.

Only I wish he'd gotten a rest—if he ever rests! I wish I knew why he went in the first place. Certainly he didn't want to go. I wanted to read him for it, but I don't think I'm supposed to know yet. Lambert didn't want to talk; he didn't tell me he was back, even though he knew I'd catch him five miles down the road. (I can do that now, with Lambert. Distance doesn't seem to make so much difference if I just ignore it.)

So all I got from his mind was bits and snatches. Something about me, and Dr. Custer, and a nasty little man called Aaronson or Behrenson. Heard of him somewhere, but can't spot where right now. I'll have to dig that out later, I guess.

But if he saw Dr. Custer, *why doesn't he tell me about it?*

WEDNESDAY, 17 MAY. It was Ronsen that he saw in Boston, and now I'm sure that something has gone wrong. I know that man. I remember him from a long time ago, back when I was still at the Institute, and long before I came here to the Study Center. He was their consulting psychiatrist, and he made a real impression on me, he did!

That's why I'm sure something very unpleasant is going on.

Lambert saw Dr. Custer, yes. But the Directors sent him to Boston because Ronsen wanted to talk to him. I wasn't supposed to know about it at all. Can you imagine? But Lambert came down to dinner last night, and walked right into my trap.

He wouldn't even look at me, the skunk. So I fixed *him*. I told him I was going to peek, and then I read him fast—before he could shift his mind to Boston traffic or something to keep me out. (He knows I can't stand traffic.)

I picked up a little—too little. There was something very unpleasant that Ronsen had said that I couldn't pick up. They were in his office, and Lambert was saying: "I don't think she's ready for it! At this point I'd never try to talk her into it. Why can't you people get it through your heads that she's a *child*, and a human being—not some kind of damned laboratory animal? That's been the trouble all along. Everybody has been so eager to *grab*, and nobody has given her a wretched thing in return."

Ronsen was smooth. Placating, but reproachful. A clear picture of him—short, balding, mean little eyes in a smug, self-righteous little face. "Michael, she's twenty-three years old. She's certainly out of diapers by now."

"But she's had only two years of training aimed at teaching *her* anything—"

"Well—there's no reason for *that* to stop, is there? Be reasonable, Michael. We certainly grant that you've done a wonderful-job with the girl. You've a perfect right to be sensitive about others working with her. But when you consider that public taxes are paying—" His look completed the sentence.

"I'm sensitive about others exploiting her, that's all." Lambert was angry, bitter-angry. Now, three days later, the anger was still sharp in his mind. "I tell you, I won't push her. And I'd never let her come up here, even if I could secure her consent. She shouldn't be touched for another year or two at least."

"And you're certain that your concern is entirely—professional?"

Whatever the implication there, it wasn't nice. Lambert caught it, and oh, my! Chart slapping down on the table, door slamming, swearing—from mild, patient Lambert. Can you imagine? And then later, no more anger. Just disgust and defeat and a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. That was what hit me when he came back last night. He couldn't hide it; no matter how hard he tried.

Well, no wonder he was tired. I remember Ronsen, all right. He wasn't so excited about me, back in those days. *Wild one*, he called me. *We haven't the time or the people to handle a thing like this in a public institution. We have to handle her just the way we'd handle any other defective. She may be*

a plus-defective instead of a minus-defective, but she's as crippled as if she were deaf and blind!

Good old Ronsen. That was before they knew about me, of course. Years ago, when I was barely thirteen; before Dr. Custer got interested and started ophthalmoscoping me and testing me. In fact, it was before I'd ever heard of Lambert of the Study Center. For that matter, before anybody had done *anything* but feed and try to keep out of my way.

Well, I'm glad it was Lambert that went to Boston and not me—for Ronsen's sake. Maybe *he* thinks I'll work with him, but if he tries coming down here he's going to be wasting his time. He's not going to learn anything from me. I'll see to that.

Still, it makes me wonder. Am I really a cripple like Ronsen meant? Does being psi-high mean that? I don't think so, naturally. But what does Lambert think? Sometimes when I try to read Lambert I'm way out at sea. I wish I knew what he *really* thinks.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. I asked Lambert tonight what Dr. Custer had said. "He wants to see you next week," he told me. "But Amy—he didn't make any promises. He didn't even sound hopeful."

"But his letter," I cried. "He said the studies showed that there wasn't any anatomical defect . . ."

Lambert leaned back and lit his pipe, shaking his head at me.

He's aged ten years this past week. Everybody thinks so. He's lost weight, and he looks as if he just hasn't slept at all. "Custer's afraid that it isn't a question of anatomy, Amy."

"But what is it, then, for heaven's sake?"

"He doesn't know. He says it's unscientific, but that it may just be that what you don't use, you lose."

"Oh, but that's silly." I chewed my lip.

"Granted."

"But he thinks that there's a chance?" I asked.

"Of course there's a chance. And Custer will do everything he can. It's just that neither of us want you to get your hopes up."

It wasn't much, but it was something. Lambert looked so beat I didn't have the heart to ask him what Ronsen's proposal was, even though I know he wants to get it out and over with. Maybe tomorrow will be better.

I spent the day with Charlie Dakin in the lab, and did a little work for a change. I've been disgustingly lazy, and poor Charlie thinks it's all his fault: Charlie reads like twenty-point type ninety percent of the time, and I'm afraid he knows it.

I can tell just exactly when he stops listening to what I'm telling him and starts thinking how interesting it would be to go to bed with me. Then all of a sudden he realizes that I'm reading him, and it throws him for the rest of the

day. I wonder why? Does he really think that I'm shocked? Or surprised? Or *insulted*? When it's been like that, generally speaking, since the first day I put on a bra? Poor Charlie . . .

But I guess I must be good enough looking. I can read it from almost every fellow that comes near me. I wonder why? I mean, why not Marjorie over in the Main Office? She's a sweet girl, but she never gets a second good look. There must be some fine differential point I'm missing somewhere, but I don't think I'll ever get it.

I'm not going to press Lambert, but I *hope* he opens up tomorrow. He's got me scared silly by now. He carries a lot of authority around here, but other people pay the bills, and I know now that *he's* scared silly of something.

THURSDAY, 18 MAY. We went back to reaction testing in the lab with Lambert today. We have that study almost finished—as much as any study I've ever undertaken is ever finished, which isn't saying very much. This one was designed to do two things—clock my stimulus-response in comparison to normals, and find out just exactly when I pick up any given stimulus from the person I'm reading.

It isn't a matter of speed. I'm so fast to respond that it doesn't mean too much, from anybody else's standpoint, and it doesn't need any training as far as I'm concerned. But where along the line do I pick

up a thought impulse? Do I catch it at its inception? Do I pick up the thought formulation, or just the final crystalized pattern? Lambert thinks I'm with it all the time; and that some training in those lines would be worth my time.

Of course, we didn't find out—not even with the ingenious little random-firing device that Dakin designed for the study. With this gadget, neither Lambert nor I know what impulse the box is going to throw at him. He just throws a switch and it starts coming. He catches it and reacts, and I in turn catch it from him and react, and we compare reaction times.

This afternoon it had us driving up a hill, and sent a ten-ton truck out of control down at us. I had my flasher on two seconds before Lambert did, of course. But our reaction times are standardized, so when we corrected for my extra speed, we knew that I had caught the impulse about 0.07 seconds after it had flashed into his mind.

Crude, of course—not nearly fast enough. And we can't reproduce on a stable basis. Lambert says it's as close as we can get without cortical probes. And that's where I put my foot down. I may have a goldmine in this head of mine, but nobody is going to put burr-holes through my skull in order to tap it. Not yet a while . . .

That's unfair of course, because it sounds as if Lambert is champing at the bit to do it, and he isn't. I've read him, and I know he wouldn't

allow it. Let's learn everything else we can learn without it first, he says. But he also thinks I'm not competent to make the decision for myself.

Why does he keep thinking I'm a child? *Am I, really?* With everything, but *everything*, coming into my mind from all sides for the past twenty-three years, haven't I learned enough to make decisions for myself? Lambert says it's been coming in, all right. I just don't know what to do with it all. But somewhere along the line I have to reach a maturation point of some kind.

It scares me, sometimes. Because I can't find an answer to it, and the answer might be perfectly horrible. I don't know where it may end, and what's worse, I don't know what point it has reached *right now*.

Sometimes I get the feeling the difference between the way my mind works and the way Lambert's, or anybody else's works is more than just a superficial difference. I'm psi-high, and he isn't—granted. But is there more to it than that? People like Ronsen think there is. They think it's a difference between *human* function and something else, and it scares me.

Because it's *just not true*. I'm as human as anybody else. But somehow things have worked out that it's me who has to prove it. I wonder if I ever will. That's why Dr. Custer has to help me; everything hangs on that. I'm to go up to

Boston next week, for final studies and testing.

And if Custer can do something—what a difference that would make! Maybe then I could get out of this whole frightening mess, put it behind me and forget about it. With the psi, alone, I don't think I ever can.

FRIDAY, 19 MAY. Today Lambert broke down about Ronsen and his proposal. It was worse than I thought it would be. The man has hit on the one thing I'd been afraid of for so long.

"He wants you to work against normals," Lambert said. "He's swallowed the latency hypothesis whole. He thinks that all a normal person needs to bring latent psi into full bloom is a powerful stimulus, something or someone to draw it out."

"Well?" I said. "Do you think so?"

"Who knows?" Lambert slammed his pencil down on the desk angrily. "No, I don't think so. But what does that mean? It means nothing, absolutely nothing. It certainly doesn't mean I'm right. Nobody knows. Ronsen wants to use you to find out."

I nodded slowly and lit a cigarette. "So I'm to be a sort of refined electrical stimulator," I said. "Well, you know what you can tell Ronsen."

He was silent, and I couldn't read him. "Amy—I'm not sure we can tell him that."

I stared at him. "You mean you think he could *force* me?"

"He says that you're a public charge, and that as long as you have to be supported and cared for, they have a right to use your faculties. On the first point he's right. You are. You have to be kept and protected. If you got a mile outside these walls you'd never survive, and you know it."

I sat stunned. "But Dr. Custer—"

"—is trying to help; granted. But he hasn't helped yet. If he can, then it's quite a different story. But I can't stall much longer, Amy. Ronsen has a powerful argument: You're psi-high. You're the first full-fledged, wide-open, free-wheeling psi-high that's ever appeared in human history. The *first*. Others in the past have had a tendency, maybe, but nothing that they could control. You've got control, you're fully developed. You're *here*; and you're the only one."

"So I happened to be unlucky," I snapped. "My genes got mixed up—"

"That's not true, and you know it," said Lambert. "We've studied your chromatoglobulins until we nearly went crazy. They're the same as any normal person's. There's no gene difference, none at all. When you're gone, you'll be *gone*, and there's no reason to think your children will have any more psi than Charlie Dakin has."

Something was building up in me then that I couldn't control any

longer. "You think I should go along with Ronsen," I said dully.

He hesitated. His mind was crying *no, no, in the name of heaven!* But he said, "I'm afraid you're going to have to, sooner or later. Ronsen has some latents up in Boston. He's certain that they're latents. He's talked to the Directors down here and he thinks you could work with his people, draw them out. You could open the door to a whole new world for human beings—"

Something broke in my mind then. It wasn't just Ronsen, or Lambert, or Dakin, or any of the others. It was all of them, dozens of them, compounded year upon year upon year. "Now listen to me for a minute," I said. "Have any of you ever considered what I wanted in this thing? *Ever?* Have any of you ever given that a thought, once? Even when you were so sick of thinking great thoughts for humanity that you let another thought leak through? Have you ever thought about what kind of a shuffle I've had since all this started? Well, think about it once! *Right now.*"

"Amy, you know I don't want to push you—"

"Listen to me, Lambert. My folks got rid of me fast, when they found out about me. Did you know that? They hated me because I *scared* them! It didn't hurt me too much, because I thought I knew *why* they hated me. I could understand it, and I went off to the Institute with-

out even crying. They were going to come see me every week, ha, ha! But they never managed to make it, not *once* after I was off their hands. And then, after the Institute had had all of me they cared for, Ronsen examined me and decided that I was a cripple.

"He didn't know anything about me then, but he thought psi was a *defect*. And that was as far as it went. I did what the Institute wanted me to do. Not what *I* wanted, never. What *they* wanted—years and years of what they wanted. And then you came along, and I came to the Study Center and did what *you* wanted."

It hurt him. It cut deep, and I knew it. That was what I wanted—to hurt him and to hurt everybody. He was shaking his head, staring at me. "Amy, be fair. I've tried, you know how hard I've tried."

"Tried what? To train me? Yes—but why? To give me better use of my psi faculties? Yes—but why? Did you do it for *me*? Is that really why you did it? Or was that just another phony front, like all the rest of them, in order to use me, to make me a little more valuable to have around—or for other reasons?"

He slapped my face, hard, so that I spun around. I could feel the awful pain and hurt in his mind as he stared at me. I felt the bitter stinging in his palm that matched the burning in my cheek. And then something fell away in his mind,

and I saw something I had never seen before—

He loved me, that man. Incredible, isn't it? He *loved* me. Me, who couldn't call him anything but Lambert, who couldn't imagine calling him *Michael*, to say nothing of *Mike*—just *Lambert*.

But he could never tell me. The barrier was too great. I needed him too much. I needed love, but not the kind he wanted to give. So my love for him had to be hidden, concealed, suppressed—yes, *suppressed*! I needed the deepest imaginable understanding, but it had to be utterly unselfish. Anything else would have been unfair, so the barrier had to be built, and he had never dared to reach across it—

Lambertson had done that. *For me*. It was all there, suddenly, so overwhelming that I had to gasp from the impact. I wanted to throw my arms around him. Instead I sat down in the chair, shaking my head helplessly. I hated myself then. I had hated myself before, but never like this.

"If I could only go somewhere," I said. "Somewhere far away where I could just live by myself for a while, and shut all the doors, and be with strangers, and *pretend* for a while—just pretend—that I'm perfectly normal."

"I wish you could," Lambert said. "But you can't. You know that. Not unless Custer can really help."

We sat there for a while. Then I said, "Let Ronsen come down.

Let him bring anybody he wants with him. I'll do what he wants. Until I see Custer."

That hurt, too, but it was different. It hurt both of us together, not separately any more. It wasn't so hard that way.

MONDAY, 22 MAY. Ronsen drove down from Boston this morning with a girl named Mary Bolton, and we went to work.

I think I'm beginning to understand how a dog can tell when someone wants to kick him and doesn't quite dare. I could feel the back of my neck prickle when that man walked into the conference room. I was hoping he might have changed since the last time I saw him. But he hadn't. I wasn't afraid of him any more—just dismally weary of him after he'd been here about ten minutes.

But that girl! I wonder what sort of story he'd told her? She couldn't have been more than sixteen, and she was petrified. At first I thought it was *him* she was afraid of. But I was mistaken. It was *me*.

It took us all morning to get around just that one impediment. The poor child could hardly talk. She was shaking all over when they arrived, but did not resist my suggestion that we walk around the grounds, alone. I read her, bit by bit—a feeler here, an idea there, just getting her used to the idea and trying to reassure her. After a while she was smiling. She thought the lagoon was lovely, and by the

time we got back to the main building she was laughing, talking about herself, beginning to relax—

Then I gave her a full blast, quickly, only a moment or two. *Don't be afraid. I hate him, yes. But I won't hurt you for anything. Let me come in, don't fight me. We've got to work as a team.*

It shook her. She went white and stopped dead, staring at me. Then she nodded, slowly. "I see," she said. "It feels as if it's way inside, deep inside."

"That's right. It won't hurt. I promise."

She nodded again. "Let's go back, now. I think I'm ready to try."

We went to work.

I was as blind as she was, at first. There was nothing there, not even a flicker of brightness. Then, probing deeper, something responded, a fugitive hint, a suggestion of something powerful, deep and hidden. But where? What was her strength? Where was she weak? I couldn't tell.

We started on dice—crude, of course, but as good a tool as any. No good to measure anything, but that was what I was there for. I was the measuring instrument. The dice were only reactors. Sensitive enough—two centimeter-cubes, tossed from a box with only gravity to work against. I showed her first, picked up her mind as the dice popped out, lead her through it. *Take one at a time—the red one first. Work on it—see? Now we*

try both. Once more—watch it! All right, now—

She sat frozen in the chair. But she was trying; the sweat stood out on her forehead. Ronsen sat tense, smoking, his fingers twitching as he watched the red and green cubes bounce on the white backdrop. Lambert watched too. But his eyes were on the girl, not on the cubes.

It was hard work. Bit by bit she began to grab; whatever I had felt in her mind seemed to leap up. I probed her, amplifying it, trying to draw it out. It was like wading through knee-deep mud—sticky, sluggish, feeble. I could feel her excitement growing, and bit by bit I released my grip, easing her out, baiting her.

"All right," I said. "That's enough."

She turned to me, wide-eyed. "I—I did it."

Ronsen was on his feet, eagerly. "It worked?"

"It worked. Not very well, but it's there. All she needs is time, and help, and patience."

"But it worked!" He turned to Lambert, his eyes shining. "Do you know what that means? It means I was right! It means others can have it, can perhaps go beyond her." He rubbed his hands together. "We can arrange a full-time lab for it, and work on three or four latents simultaneously. It's a wide-open door, Lambert! Can't you see what it means?"

Lambert nodded, and gave me a long look. "Yes, I think I do."

"I'll start arrangements tomorrow," Ronsen said.

Lambert shook his head. "Not tomorrow. You'll have to wait until next week."

"Why?"

"Because Amy would prefer to wait, that's why."

Ronsen looked at him, and then at me, resentfully. Finally he shrugged. "If you insist."

"We'll talk about it next week," I said. I was so tired I could hardly look up at him. I stood up, and smiled at the girl. Poor kid, I thought. So excited and eager about it now. Does she have any idea what she's walking into?

Certainly Ronsen couldn't tell her.

Later, when they were gone, Lambert and I walked down toward the lagoon. It was a lovely cool evening; the ducks were down at the water's edge. Every year there was a mother duck herding a line of ducklings down the shore and into the water. They never seemed to go where she wanted them to, and she had to go back, prod them out into stream.

We stared at the water in silence. Then Lambert kissed me. It was the first time he had ever done that.

"We could go away," I whispered in his ear. "We could run out on Ronsen and the Study Center and everyone. We could pretend—"

He shook his head slowly. "Amy, don't—"

"We could! I'll see Dr. Custer, and he'll tell me he can help, I

know he will. I won't need the Study Center any more, or any other place, or anybody but you."

He didn't answer. I hated it, but I knew there wasn't anything he could answer. Not then.

FRIDAY, 26 MAY. Yesterday we went to Boston to see Custer, and now it looks as if it's all over. Now even I can't pretend that there's anything more to do. Custer was kind; he told me the truth, the final results of his studies.

Next week Ronsen will come down, and I'll go to work with him just the way he has it outlined. He thinks we have three years work ahead, of us before anything can be published, before we can really be sure we have brought a latent into full use of his psi. Maybe so, I don't know. Maybe in three years. I'll find some way to get myself excited about it. But I'll do it, anyway, because there's nothing else to do.

There was no anatomical defect—Custer was right about that. The eyes are perfect, beautiful gray eyes, Custer says, and the optic nerves and auditory nerves are perfectly functional. The defect isn't there. It's deeper. Too much deeper ever to change it.

What you no longer use, you lose, was what Custer said. With apologies because he couldn't explain it any better. It's like a price tag, perhaps. Long ago, before I knew anything at all, the psi was so strong it started compensating,

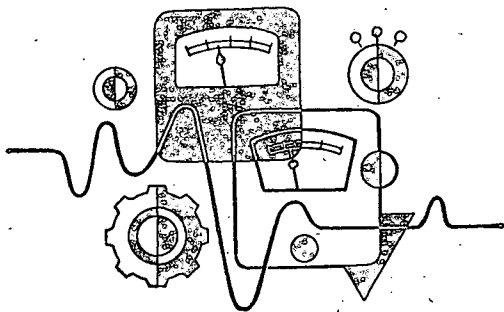
bringing in more and more from *other* minds—such a wealth of rich, clear, interpreted impressions that there was never any need for my own, and certain hookups never got hooked up. That's only a theory, of course, but there isn't any other way to explain it.

But am I wrong to hate it? More than anything else in the world I want to *see* Lambert, *see* him smile and light his pipe, *hear* him laugh. I want to know what color *really* is, what music *really* sounds like un-

filtered through somebody else's ears.

I want to see a sunset, just once. Just once I want to see the mother duck take her ducklings down to the water. But I never will. I see and hear things nobody else can; instead, and the fact that I am stone blind and stone deaf shouldn't make any difference. After all, I've always been that way—

Maybe next week I'll ask Ronsen what he thinks about it. It should be interesting to see.



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meet miss solar system

by . . . Milton Lesser

Like everything else in the star-studded universe beauty can be a flaming question mark. But not when real wisdom takes command.

THE SUB-COMMITTEE for the Selection of a Chairman of the Board of Judges for the First Annual (Earth Reckoning) Interplanetary Beauty Contest ran the gamut from the Director Emeritus of the Anthropology Chair, Solar University, to the Under Secretary of the Department of Extra-terrestrial Conditioning (Female Division), to the President of the Board of New Hollywood Five Senses Productions, until it finally settled, as a last resort, on me.

"Mr. Juniper," a member of the Sub-Committee had told me moments after I'd disembarked on Earth as the first and only returnee from the Alpha Centauri expedition, "Mr. Juniper, you're probably the only objective male in the Solar System today regarding feminine pulchritude."

Growing up on the twenty year journey across some twenty-six trillion miles to Alpha Centauri I'd been called a lot of things, but this was a new one. On the Centauri planet they'd shaken their heads sadly at me, said it was all a mistake and dropped me into suspended animation for the return trip,

Some months ago Jack Vance thrilled us by making us an arbiter in an interstellar beauty contest. We watched the contestants parade in scintillating cosmic attire, and, as you may remember, we cast our vote for a very unusual girl. Now Milton Lesser delights us anew with a startlingly novel variation on what may well be the theme of the century—beauty that outshines the sun.

figuring twenty years wasted out of a man's life was enough, even if I were just a plain, ordinary, unconditioned, un-specialized human being.

I remember them huddled there at the makeshift spaceport before all the lights went out for a couple of decades, their rich blue pelts screening the impurities from the Centaurian air while I was bundled in every protective garment ever devised by man. Something about plain old epidermis being unable to cope with the *n* factor in the atmosphere.

Anyway, back to Earth I came, dreaming away twenty years. Elapsed subjective time, of course: a little over two years. But here I was, a non-freak who'd gotten on the Centauri ship by mistake, because of a mixup at the hospital where I was born, undiscovered until it was too late. You see, conditioned characteristics don't become manifest for six months and now I was back on Earth without too many ideas and no prospects for a bright future.

I later learned the Beauty Contest Sub-Committee was quite prepared to bat me over the head and shanghai me out to the asteroid Eros where the contest would be held, as unpretty a coffin-shaped slab of rock as ever you laid eyes on. It was far from necessary. My answer was one word, affirmative, no-string-attached.

I'd never earned a penny in my life, and when they mentioned the

salary I popped out from under the devirus spray, dusted the white powder off my bare shoulders, covered my nakedness there in the anti-contamination room of the Earth spaceport with a big grin, shook hands all around and said, "Yes."

A week later I was saying, "So this is Eros." Another Sub-Committee had selected the site for the Beauty Contest, I'm told. Eros, the junior-sized god of love. It certainly was appropriate.

They'd rigged up a force-field on Eros, holding out the black cold of interplanetary space and holding in Earth-normal atmosphere and artificial gravity for the benefit of the Chairman of the Board of Judges. It was to create quite a stink later, but by then I was to be called Jack the Ripper, Lord High Executioner—a miserably un-specialized terrestrial human who almost wished he'd never been sent back from Alpha Centauri.

I don't remember which reporter called me Ripper first, but it stuck. Not Jack the Ripper, not right away, but Ripper, short for Rip van Winkle, who'd also slept for twenty years, more centuries ago than I can remember. Unfortunately, my name is Jack, and from Ripper, short for Rip van Winkle, to Jack the Ripper is not a very long step, especially in view of the circumstances.

So, they set me up in my office and started parading in the associate judges to get acquainted. I couldn't get chummy with Mr. Fairview

of Venus, since he came floating in, his gills flapping up oxygen, in a water bubble. His radio squawked something about the unearthly grace of the Venusian girls and the way they're seen to best advantage in a phosphorescent sea at midnight with a trident-shaped tiara in their hair and would I somehow arrange it. As a judge, he'd be about as objective and honest as a salesman trying to sell refrigerators on Pluto.

Half an hour later, I began to understand why the Sub-Committee had selected me. It was out of sheer desperation. Mr. Jekyl of Mars pointed out that the Martian mamzells looked good with their water sacs distended and rouged. Mr. Cantrell of Titan went into a song-and-dance about the red crystals of the Titan misses. Mrs. Maybanks of Jupiter nearly scared me out of my wits.

"So you're Juniper," she boomed, storming into my trim office and nearly upending the chrome-steel desk in her eagerness to lean across it and shake her spaceboat fist in my face. "I smelled a rat all along, Juniper. Always can. You look exactly like an Earthman."

"Well," I assured her, "I am. Have a seat."

I should have thought the matter over more carefully. There was no chair which would fit Mrs. Maybanks' posterior, ample even by Jovian standards. She was seven and a half feet tall and so broad across the shoulders she had to come in

through the door sideways. At first I thought she was wearing a leathery garment, but it turned out to be her skin, fairly rippling with muscle.

She wore a transparent spherical breather—three feet in diameter—about her head, seamed and hinged from pole to pole since she never could have squeezed her skull through the neckpiece.

She settled her bulk on the desk, which sagged visibly. She said, "Earthman, huh? You wouldn't recognize real beauty if you saw it. What do you know about the out-worlds, anyway?"

"Not a thing," I admitted. "But I don't know anything about Earth, either. I spent my whole life on a ship en route to Alpha Centauri, with conditioned, specialized people half my size, complete with blue, fuzzy fur, double-lidded eyes and nostril plugs."

"They were even smaller than you are, Mr. Juniper?"

"Decidedly," I said.

"Well, then tell me this: how can you be expected to realize the essence of beauty is size—" she stood up, and expanded her chest which, I noticed, was clearly devoid of mammaries—"and brute, animal strength, not to mention the ability to adapt to your particular environment?"

"I can't. You see, I have been selected because mine is the fresh approach with no preconceived notions." I was reciting what the Sub-Committee had told me. "No fixed

ideas, no stereotypes, no cliché standards."

"And no sense, if you ask me. The whole contest is a waste of time anyway. I say."

"Far from it," I said, still reciting. "The first wave of conditioned colonization has passed into the pages of history. Social and economic intercourse between the new, mutated human races is the next logical phase. That was the purpose of the whole gigantic undertaking, in the first place. Specialization, colonization, a better standard of living for everyone, relief for overpopulation, and so on. But—"

"But," broke in Mrs. Maybanks, leaning over and staring down at me, "what has that got to do with a beauty contest? If Miss Southern Jupiter doesn't win, the whole thing is obviously rigged."

"Now, just a minute," I bristled. "You're supposed to be a judge, remember? You're not here to promote Miss Southern Whatzis, you're here as an objective critic of feminine pulchritude. And I'll tell you what it has to do with a beauty contest. The government wants the citizenry of each world to become familiar with the citizenry of all the other worlds. Take yourself, Mrs. Maybanks. Would you consider yourself a freak?"

"How—dare—you!" she cried.

It was a tense moment. I found myself confronted by a great fist, unmoving, inches from my face.

I hastened to say, "That's pre-

cisely it. You're self-conscious about your size, your girth, about the very characteristics, thick skin and tremendous muscle power, which make it possible for you to cope with your environment. You'll get an inferiority complex unless something is done about it. Think of how the poor Venusians feel."

"Those fish."

"Right. Those fish. But they're human fish."

"Or the Martian camels."

"They're not camels. They don't even look like camels. They're people, just like you."

"Just like us? With those water sacs? Really, Mr. Juniper."

"Just like you because they've been adapted to withstand the Martian environment—to find it pleasant, in fact—like you've been adapted to withstand the Jovian environment. See what I mean?"

"What are your own particular standards of beauty, Mr. Juniper?"

I considered the question. It was a good one. The Sub-Committee had been so content with itself for apparently finding an objective judge, they hadn't bothered to ask me.

"My standards," I said, "are purely intuitive. Besides, I am a *tabula rasa* regarding female beauty, since the only females I have known were small, blue fuzz—"

"I know. Alpha Centaurians. Midgets. That sort of eliminates us, doesn't it? We're giants, you know."

One of the thin, looped legs of

my desk had been set a fraction of a degree off the perpendicular, I discovered at that moment. It gave a little, carving a furrow in the plastic floor. Suddenly it collapsed entirely, depositing Mrs. Maybanks on two dozen foot-square plastic tiles.

"You see?" she wailed. "This place isn't even made to meet Jovian requirements. We won't have a chance in that contest, and you know it. Well, Miss Southern Jupiter will get at least one vote, let me tell you."

I let her tell me, then disqualified her as a judge. I also disqualified Mr. Fairview, Mr. Cantrell and the others. That left Jack Juniper of Alpha Centauri and deep space. I wasn't feeling cocky about it, either. Only determined—mildly at the time—to conduct a fair contest. With the judging only a week off, I hoped there wouldn't be any time for repercussions. I hoped in vain. Chalk it up to inexperience.

When Lamar Hoague, an Earthman and the Secretary of Interplanetary Commerce, visited me a couple of hours later he made up in pure fury for what he lacked in size. A small man, balding, deceptively mild, he said, "See here, Juniper. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Getting ready to run a contest," I said. "Why?"

"You call firing all the other judges running a contest?"

"If they're not impartial, yes."

"You can't be the sole judge!"

I shrugged. "Find me some impartial people, then."

"I—can't. We tried. We did the best we could. I'll admit some of our people may have been mildly prejudiced, but that's to be expected. Just what kind of an egomaniac are you, anyhow?"

"All kinds, if you say so," I said. "I'm sorry if you don't like it. I guess you can fire me. I guess—"

"Stop guessing. Re-hire them."

I could do it, and conduct as cockeyed a contest as ever hit the pier at Coney Island or Atlantic City or wherever they used to run them. Or I could refuse and wait for the ax to fall. Either way public opinion would probably condemn me, but my way I had a fighting chance.

"Uh-uh," I said. "They're through. Couldn't you get some kind of judging machine?"

"To measure what, you clown? Bust size? The Jovians don't suckle their young. They can't. Something about the atmosphere. Shape of legs? The Venusians only have one, not two, and it ends in a finny tail. Water sac capacity? Miss Syrtis Major is your winner, hands down."

"Then I guess you're stuck with me."

"I'm not happy about it, Juniper."

"So be it," I said, shrugging again. "Am I through?"

"Hell, no," Hoague squeaked. "You're our boy. The videocasters are having a field day with you. You don't know Solar System

women, any of 'em. You're unique. You're the one possible Chairman of the Board of Judges out of five billion eligible males. Now," he moaned, "you're the whole board. We're stuck with you."

"I hope you won't regret it."

"We'd better not. Just what are your criteria, anyway?"

"You know, this is the second time I've been asked that question today. I don't know. It'll come to me. Aesthetically, of course, one is conditioned to accept standards of beauty with which one is familiar. Since I'm familiar with none of these—"

"It will be entirely hit or miss!"

"—I'll probably disclose completely objective standards for the contest."

"That's what our press release said. Don't quote it to me."

"There's nothing else I can quote. Well, Mr. Hoague, I'll see you at the contest."

I was beginning to like the situation. For twenty years on the Alpha Centauri ship I was the misfit, the throwback, the poor, helpless, pampered un-freak. Maybe I'd developed some mighty nasty neuroses as a result. Not that I was going to stare with a jaundiced eye at all the strange, specialized features of all my cousins, nor squeeze a water sac or two, nor tickle a Venusian's sensitive tail the way the Centaurs had stroked my bare, fuzzless skin and laughed.

I would try to be objective. How, I didn't know.

"There's one other thing, Mr. Juniper," Hoague told me. "I hope you're pretty good at getting around in weightlessness."

"The best," I said. "Twenty years of it. I was being conditioned for gravity while I slept on the way back, so I suppose I'm the guy in the middle now. Gravity bothers me. No gravity also bothers me. Why?"

"There have been too many complaints about Eros being Earth-normal in gravity and atmosphere. Favoritism toward the Earth entry, they say. Maybe they're right."

"So?"

"So we're moving the contest out to a bubble in space, as soon as it can be built. It's close by Eros, but a completely weightless, climateless vacuum. They'll all be wearing spacesuits. Uh, transparent spacesuits, I might add. Good luck, Juniper. You'll need it."

Did I ever? The videocasters were having another kind of field day as soon as word got around about the wholesale firing of the judges. Did they interview me? Absolutely not. Did they jump to all sorts of conclusions? You bet they did.

Juniper (said the Martian video-caster) fired Rodney Jekyl of Syrtis Major today as a judge in the First Annual Beauty Contest because Mr. Jekyl, according to a usually reliable source close to the Secretary of Interplanetary Commerce, refused to accept Earth standards of beauty as his guide. Will the undifferentiated

prototype of Earth therefore be a shoo-in? We think so.

Juniper of Earth (said the Jovian videocaster, a strapping male behemoth who would make Mrs. Maybanks look like a guppy), complete with phoney story about a make-believe trip to Alpha Centauri, has in his first day on Eros stripped the coming Beauty Pageant of all elements except the formality of naming the straw-thin contestant from Earth as winner. In a sweeping move, Juniper today wiped the slate clean of all judges . . . etc., etc.

Jack the Ripper (said the Earth videocaster) has slashed his way into the public eye today by apparently rigging the Beauty Contest in favor of the Earth girl, Dawne Flaim of Richmond, Virginia, then declaring Earth-like Eros out of bounds for the contest, putting Miss Flaim at a terrible disadvantage in competing with the artificially evolved denizens of the outworlds.

This caster considers the move an adroit—if diabolical—maneuver by the Ripper, who, incidentally, hails from an outworld further than all the others, to discredit Miss Flaim and remove her from serious consideration as a possible Miss Solar System. We hereby cast one vote for Jack the Ripper as Lord High Executioner of Interplanetary relations . . .

The next time I saw Mrs. Maybanks, she was Chairman of the Public Relations Committee in behalf of Miss Southern Jupiter. She entered my office bearing a photo-

graph of her entry and a card giving vital statistics.

"If this is still a contest," she boomed, "I thought you'd like to see this."

She left before I could say yes or no. The answer would have been yes, of course, although by then I was so mixed up over all the things I was supposed to have done and the reasons involved that I wasn't even sure. I read the card.

MISS MIDGE TURNER of SOUTHERN JUPITER.

Age: 20 (Earth reckoning)

Height: 7'1". Weight: 438 lbs.

V.S.: 63, 58, 76

Eccentricity of Planetary Orbit: .0484.

Inclination to Ecliptic: 2° 29' 29"

Gravity at Surface: 2.64XE

Period of Rotation: 9h 55m (Earth)

Diameter (miles): 86,703

Albedo: 44%

I read it again and then got Lamar Hoague on the vidiphone. He was busy a few thousand miles out in space from Eros, watching them construct the space bubble, and by the time I got through his executive secretary to his First Assistant to his Girl Friday to the man himself, I was boiling mad.

"Are we running an exterography lesson or a beauty contest?" I snapped. "Listen to this." And I read it.

He waved a hand deprecatingly. "So what? They're interesting facts, aren't they?"

"Maybe, but only in their place. Tell me this, if you can: what has the albedo of Jupiter got to do with Miss Turner's pulchritude or lack of same? So Jupiter has a short day. So I should care. Don't you see what they're doing? They're pointing out differences instead of showing how we're all cousins, brothers under the skin, bosom com—"

"Keep your shirt on, Rip—I mean, Juniper." Solar interference did things with his face. I twisted dials and got a reasonable facsimile back on my screen. "Then out-worlds are just apologizing for their girls, that's all. Sure, they're not as pretty as Miss Dawne Flaim, but they're under a disadvantage. They want you to take that into account."

"I'm going to try and be objective," I said for the hundred and twenty-third time.

"Then Miss Flaim is the winner."

"I wouldn't say that," I stormed.

"I wouldn't say that at all. She probably looks like a walking twig to the Jovians, like a—"

"I haven't got the time for any of your observations," said the Secretary of Interplanetary Commerce, and cut the connection before I could tell him I was going to strip the I.D. cards down to vital statistics, which I did, anyway.

Then I really became the Lord High Executioner. Mars and Venus said I wasn't even interested in out-world differences, let alone out-world beauty. Jupiter maintained

an ominous silence after simply stating the size of Jupiter was apparently unimportant to me. Titan, Callisto and Ganymede formed the Satellite Society for the Prevention of Lack of Dissemination of Extra-terrestrial Culture. Earth said Jack the Ripper, in discounting planetary differences, was clearly embarking on a policy of favoritism toward the adapted sisters of lovely Dawne Flaim.

I couldn't argue with that last point, for Dawne Flaim—fantastic name or not—*was* lovely.

Under the rules of the contest, I wasn't allowed to see the entrants until the day of judgment arrived. According to the various videocasters it was Jack (the Ripper) Juniper who was going to be judged, and probably burned in effigy on half a dozen worlds.

When the day finally arrived I was beginning to wish they hadn't bothered to stir me from my twenty year snooze. I was ferried from my office on Eros, complete with judge's robes underneath my transparent spacesuit, if you please, to Lamar Hoague's bubble in space. It had been a quick job but a good one, a half mile in diameter globe reflecting sunlight brilliantly from one side and myriad-gleaming starlight from the other.

Unfortunately, it reminded me too much of the golden apple which Eris, Eros' aunt on his father's side, tossed into the middle of another beauty contest a long time before history began, starting, among other

things, the Trojan War. Jack Juniper, I told myself, you are looking at the bleak side of things. But then, so was everyone else after Eris threw her apple.

So, in through the bubble-lock I went, firing my hand-jets and getting the lay of the land. There wasn't much to see. Colorlessly opaque, the inner surface of Lamar Hoague's bubble could not be accused of favoritism. There was a long ramp floating weightlessly in the center of the sphere, down which the contestants would parade. There were floating benches, complete with handholds, for the gentlemen of video and various visiting firemen. And there was a long judge's bench which Hoague had probably provided out of spite.

I'd certainly look conspicuous holding down it's center.

Pretty soon the videocasters and others began to file in through half a dozen locks, each in transparent spacesuit, each floating and jetting awkwardly toward his own rooting section. I said rooting section. And that meant cheerleaders, too, although, thank you, Mother Nature, for the vacuum of space, there would be no brass bands.

The contest was rigged, all right. It was rigged in favor of chauvenism, narrow-mindedness and bigotry. And it was rigged to condemn one Jack Juniper who, until this moment, had not figured out on what basis he would judge the contestants. This moment came and passed. And he still hadn't figured.

He thought he would have a slight headstart before the wolves came in pursuit because of his familiarity with weightlessness, but he wasn't sure.

Five minutes after the last local partisan had taken his seat, the contestants—there were seven of them—entered the space bubble. In the last few days, mostly spent staving off assault in my office on Eros, I'd heard so much about the various charms of the various planetary females that I'd developed the natural red-blooded interest, especially since, according to the way fate had spun her web, I might have been a suitable mate for any one of the girls.

As it turned out, I would have to wait before I was vouchsafed a vision of anything. The seven girls entered the bubble, all right, but each one sealed tight in a square little space ferry without windows of any kind. The seven ferries reached the head of the ramp, balanced their forward motion with braking rockets and remained suspended there.

Angry Jovian giant partisans stared across space at angry Venusian merman partisans, the latter eschewing spacesuits and benches in favor of water tanks. Earthmen exchanged baleful glances with their one-time friends from Mars. No one even looked at me.

Lamar Hoague rendered a rhetorically passable opening address about how we were all brothers under the skin and should make the

most—from the viewpoint of collective co-operation—of our differences.

"Earth," he finished, "is the womb from which all human life springs. It is thus with a sense of racial paternity that I welcome you all here to this First Annual Interplanetary Beauty Contest."

Radios squawked and buzzed with hostile excitement. There were hoots and catcalls when one of the Venusian tanks employed one of Newton's laws of motion much to the dismay of its occupant, who had merely turned over and lashed out in playful boredom with his tail. The tank floated with no great haste toward the Jovian section, where two or three of the giants batted it around for a while between them while the tumbling merman began to pound frantically on the inside of his glassite prison.

A possible riot was averted when the Venusian thought to turn on his tank-rockets and so soar away intact but minus some of his dignity. Fortunately the Jovians could withstand temperatures in a range as wide as the day-night variation on Earth's moon, so the backlash didn't particularly bother them.

The noise bothered me. There were jeers and cheers, depending on whether you liked the Venusian or the Jovians. I suddenly wished we hadn't supplied each observer with a radio transmitter. Space vacuum sometimes can come in mighty handy.

"For heaven's sake," Lamar

Hoague hissed into his transmitter, forgetting he was broadcasting on my private wave-length and somehow thinking whispering would help, "get this show underway. There's no telling what they'll do, in the mood they're in. We have you to thank for this, Juniper. I hope you're satisfied."

"Me? What did I do?"

"Neyer mind. Forget about all the preliminaries, Parade around the girl and those creatures—"

"They're all girls!"

"Parade them around and make your decision."

"Just like that?"

"It better be just like that. Look at all those people."

I looked. He was right. Mind you, I don't think people are essentially ornery. I like people. Even fuzzy blue ones. But this whole thing had got off on the wrong foot. Hell, the new adapted races of man were all pretty young, all more than a little doubtful of their own specialized traits, all still battling tooth, nail, water sac and finny tail against still hostile environments.

Right now, a good substantial push in the wrong direction might write finis to the adaptability experiment and might—just might, but there it was—be the end of man's attempt to prove he wasn't earthbound. Don't try to tell me something as inconsequential as a beauty contest could not supply that push. Look at Eris and her

apple and remember there's a whole lot of truth in those old myths.

I looked—and cleared my throat. I said, "Will the ferrymen please prepare their vessels for disembarking? Will the contestants prepare to come out?"

"Who says so?" The voice, arrogant and surly, was anonymous.

"I do. Jack Juniper, Chairman of the Board of Judges."

"The whole kit and kaboodle, you mean! Jack the Ripper."

"Are you afraid your contestant won't win?" I snapped back at my nameless foe. "Why don't you give her a chance?"

"Why don't *you*?"

"I will, if you all will let me. Will the first contestant move down the ramp, please? The girl from Venus, since we'll work our way outward from the sun?"

The first ferry, as it turned out, had no door. The boxlike craft simply split in two, revealing a Venusian water-tank. The tank rolled serenely down the ramp, housing as pretty a little mermaid as ever you laid eyes on. I jetted closer for a good look and by then all the ferries had split like suddenly ripened fruit, their cargoes parading down the ramp.

Miss Venus had the nicest blue eyes, deep and clear and all the clichés about mountain lakes and everything. Her flawless skin was a pale green through the water; the darker green gills pulsing with delicate rhythm, almost timorously. The skin merged gradually with deepest

aqua scales, with the supple, vibrant smoothness of her tail structure. But it was the eyes mostly, the way they looked at me. Not pleading, but hopeful. Not arrogant, but expectant.

Miss Earth—Miss Dawne Flaim of Richmond, Virginia—was next. Subjectively, she could kindle the fires in me, I guess, because a misplaced Alpha Centaurian becomes, of necessity, an Earthman. But she wasn't consciously kindling anything. She just walked down the ramp.

How she did it in weightlessness, I'll never know. But she did it. She walked in one beautiful liquid motion from crown of wheat-gold hair to trim loveliness of high-arched feet, and mentally, at least I had to withdraw my tongue and shut my mouth. She had the same eyes, by the way. Expectant, hopeful. Just a couple of nice kids—not like the Fairviews or Hoagues or Maybanks at all.

I had to squeeze Miss Mars' water-sac after all. It was expected of me. Well, damn it, if you had to have a water sac on a parched desert of a planet—and you certainly did—that Martian miss had a pretty one, rouged a vivid scarlet for the occasion.

Miss Jupiter displayed her muscles which, when you got right down to it, did ripple with a pleasing smoothness under her sleek leathery skin, and with all her 438 pounds she still could carry herself with admirable grace. Who am I,

who lacked the blue fuzz and other items of a bonafide Alpha Centaurian, to complain about a couple of hundred pounds of muscle which could be put to good use on a planet with more than twice Earth's gravity?

And so it went. And so I looked and made brief, intelligent remarks. They finished their parade down the ramp. I had them go to the top and start all over again. And again. Mrs. Maybanks started yelling for Miss Southern Jupiter to use her muscles. I think she meant on me.

I had a quick conference with Hoague, who was desperate. The Martians were furious. Their contestant, dry of skin and small of stature but with a lovely water sac, really lovely, didn't have a chance. They were threatening to break out of the Interplanetary Commerce Ring altogether.

The Humanitarian League on Earth had radioed a message to Eros, saying that they had voted unanimously to condemn any further adaptability experiments in the light of the shady doings out here. They challenged us to make them change their minds.

Mrs. Maybanks was threatening to take matters into her own chaotically capable hands.

Lamar Hoague grabbed my arm from behind and said, "It's all yours, Juniper. Start deciding."

Every time I went near the Venusian girl's tank, there were roars of approval from the Venusian rooting section, although-said roars

sounded bubbly. Propinquity to the Earth contestant brought cries of, "Flaim, Flaim! Win the Game!" For good measure, someone added: "You all."

The Martians wanted me to squeeze Miss Syrtis Major's water sac again. The Jovians were even suggesting I try a waltz-around with Miss Southern Jupiter.

They all looked at me. They all said, without speaking: This is far more important than any beauty contest, Jack the Ripper Juniper.

I thought and I thought and I thought. The contestants were letting slip their wooden smiles. The hope and expectancy was being replaced by fatigue. All except Miss Venus who, in that respect, was lucky. The videocasters glared ominously and partisanly every time my eyes left their chosen woman.

Well, what did they expect? Each girl, in her way, had something to offer. Each was, in all probability, the loveliest example of her own species. Who was I, a Nietzschean superman or someone?

I was Jack the Ripper, that's who.

And they were all looking at me.

I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Board of Judges—" that was a mistake and I suffered in silence through the cat-calls—"the Board of Judges has finally, uh, reached a decision."

Purely by accident, I had been standing in proximity to Miss Southern Jupiter, who wrapped her arms around me and squeezed in delight until I was blue in the face,

then white. The Jovians were whooping and hollering. Dawne Flaim looked quite downcast, albeit demure.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, picking myself off the floor of the ramp and jetting some safe distance away from Miss Southern Jupiter, "you're looking at Miss Solar System right now. She has Miss Jupiter's ability to meet a hostile environment with strength." I took a deep breath. The Jovians went wild.

"She has Miss Mars' capacity to get along without water if that's what we find necessary on certain of the outworlds.

"She can swim like Miss Venus, and learn, through adaptive mutations, to extract oxygen from water or anything else. Where necessary, she has a beautiful aqua tail.

"She's frosted crystal like Miss Titan, who has to live on a cold world, and can hibernate in deep caves when she has to, like Miss Ganymede. She even—" I gulped, because they were listening, without a sound. Calm before the storm? "She even has hearing organs in the soles of her feet, like Miss Callisto.

"And," I went on, looking straight ahead and wishing the walls of the bubble weren't so opaque, "she has that ageless, timeless femininity which has survived all changes, all environments, all wars and famines and long journeys

and hardships. She has that quality, call it what you want, which was born in the women of Earth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, meet Miss Solar System. *She's all of them.*"

I looked at Lamar Hoague. Hoague couldn't decide whether to shake his fist at me or thump me soundly on the back and congratulate me.

There was this silence. I wondered which was the nearest spacelock.

Someone shouted, "Hooray for Miss Solar System!"

And someone else, "Hooray for Jack the Ripper!"

Hoague figured he'd better thump my back.

Well, that's the story. Interplanetary Commerce liked it so much, they have me touring the Solar System with my seven-girl composite. My future's assured, so I guess I can recommend a twenty year snooze to anyone.

Great fun, too. I take an occasional swim with Miss Venus, and dry out in the sun with Miss Mars, and try to copy the delicate crystal patterns off Miss Titan's back, and swap long sleep stories with Miss Ganymede, and learn how to pick up dance rhythms with my feet with Miss Callisto, and take a waltz-around or two with Miss Jupiter who always promises to take it easy but sometimes forgets.

But I'm going to marry—Dawne Flaim—Miss Earth.

on
the
average

by ... Frank B. Bryning

Critics of Dr. Rhine's famed ESP experiments have eyed the Law of Averages with skepticism. In space those critics may triumph.

ANCHORED TO THE floor by his magnetic soles, Ted Price, B. Chem., sat back on his heels in the effortless, knee-hugging posture which was so easy to sustain in free orbit, where his weight was nil. And made brief notations on his check list. Before him and on either side the ladder-connected racks of the storage bay in Laboratory 4 spiraled up from floor to ceiling. Guard rails and wall clips embraced row upon row of gallon-capacity carboys of liquid chemicals, each scrupulously labeled.

Suddenly Price ducked and crouched lower at the sound, instant-short but menacing, of rupturing metal, shattering glass, and a high-pitched, brief whistle. Breaking foot contact, he flattened himself to the floor and pushed against the rack in front of him.

Backwards, an inch or two above the floor, he floated, until his feet touched the bulkhead beyond the open end of the storage bay, and he got them under him again. Keeping low, he peered cautiously upwards between fingers held over

When a proud ship is in dire peril in the gulfs between the planets it takes a navigator of heroic mold to bring her safely to port without a single waste motion. Happily waste motions are seldom encountered in the interplanetary sagas of F. B. Bryning, for he has little patience with the wreckers and destroyers of space opera science fiction. In Mr. Bryning's unforgettable yarns men either stand or fall by their inner resources, chronicled with a documentary-type realism that adds a new side to the bright, prophetic horizons of tomorrow.

his eyes—and blanched at what he saw.

Drifting and spinning in the air were a myriad fragments of broken glassware and globules of potent liquids ranging in size from fine raindrops to large oranges. Like soap bubbles from a child's pipe the liquids floated in the zero gravity interior of the space vehicle, moving here and there at random—grazing, touching, colliding, coalescing, hissing, fuming, and rapidly filling the confined space of the storage bay with gases of unguessable composition.

A glance showed Price that six carboys—three on one shelf and three further along on the shelf below—had disintegrated, as if a slash had been made at them, diagonally, across the shelving. Then his view was obscured by a white fog as, right before his face, a large globule of ammonia collided with another of hydrochloric acid, and enveloped him in an acrid cloud of irritating, stinging, ammonium chloride.

Shutting his eyes tightly he swung away, coughing and gasping, to blunder into a grape-like cluster of ether globules.

"Dr. Waddy!" he choked, as he groped his way along the bulkhead. "Look out for ammonia . . . ether . . . Look out . . ."

On the laboratory side of the storage bay partition Senior Chemist Charles Waddy gave no sign of having heard. With his feet gripped by floor loops, he swayed about

before his bench, limply upright, a blood-red groove ploughed skull-deep across his scalp.

In Laboratory 3, next door, chemists Brocklehurst and Wright, who had been making quite a little noise on their own account with a grinding wheel and glass tubing, had noticed nothing amiss. After a few minutes, however, Wright found Brocklehurst regarding him intently.

"Something's wrong with our air," said Brocklehurst. "Your earlobe gauge shows an oxygen deficiency. How's mine?"

"Yours too," confirmed Wright. "And it's getting cold in here. We're losing air!" Slipping his feet from the floor loops he dived across to the intercom. "I'll report."

Brocklehurst remained where he was, his eyes scanning the wall to his left, which was the outer wall of Vehicle Five—Chemistry—on Satellite Space Station Commonwealth Two. After twenty seconds he, too, slipped his foot loops, dived across the room, and jerked open a small drawer built into the wall bench.

"Report also a half-inch perforation in outer wall of Lab Three," he called to Wright as he took a four-inch disk of rubber from the drawer.

Levitating across to the perforation through which the air was hissing, he first explored its edge with a fingertip. Then he peeled the calico from the adhesive underside of the rubber disk and slapped

the patch over the hole. Dimpled in the middle by the air pressure, and sealed by the cement of its underside, it remained rigidly in position.

Facing about, Brocklehurst studied the bulkhead to his right for several seconds.

"And there's another hole—same size—in the bulkhead between Labs Three and Four!"

Meanwhile, Dr. Frank Thomas, Chief Chemist, and Officer Commanding Vehicle Five—Chemistry—had begun, to make the "all lines" connection on his intercom on his own initiative.

"General emergency!" he announced before Wright had quite finished his report. "Attention all personnel, Vehicle Five! Prepare to get airtight! Prepare—to—get—airtight!"

He swung towards the wall and closed two switches. "All emergency airtight doors and air-duct cut-offs now closing. All air control sectors now isolated. Suspect we have been holed by a meteorite of approximately half-inch diameter in region of Laboratory Three. All personnel check condition of air and report to Air Control . . . Laboratory Three personnel, please attend—"

"Laboratory Three acknowledging," came Wright's voice at once.

"Lab Three personnel please check perforations and estimate path of meteorite through section of Vehicle—and report. Proceed."

Thomas turned from his intercom to call Vehicle Two—Admin-

istration — by radio-phone. But Wright again broke in: "Reporting from Lab Three. There's a seepage of irritant gas from Lab Four through perforation in bulkhead. Smells like ammonium chloride, mainly—"

Thomas whirled back to the intercom, his face tense. "Get into oxygen helmet and skin protecting gloves—you and Brocklehurst," he snapped, dropping the impersonal form of address. "Find out what's wrong in Lab Four and get Waddy and Price out if they're in trouble. Also bring out sample of contaminated air. Hurry!"

He cut in Air Control, who were calling him.

"All sections reported except Laboratory Four," said Air Control. "No reply from Lab Four to our repeated call. Labs Three and Five report lowered air pressure. All other sections normal. Further report from Lab Three. Gas percolating from Lab Four through—"

Thomas cut off Air Control and flipped two other keys.

"Personnel Laboratories One and Eight get into space suits with radios immediately and report to me in person before fixing helmets," he ordered. "Hurry! Please be in my office in five minutes. This is urgent!"

Cutting off, Thomas swung again to the inter-vehicle radio-phone and called Administration.

"Emergency!" he announced. "Vehicle Five—Chemistry—calling! O. C. Thomas speaking. Medi-

cal assistance required urgently. Please relay—and hurry! Vehicle Five penetrated by half-inch meteorite. Personnel of Lab Four evidently incapacitated. Injuries won't be known until they are evacuated from Lab. Evacuation now proceeding. Suspect two men overcome by gases known to be polluting air of Lab Four. Possible skin damage also. For Medical Officer's information, ammonium chloride has been recognized as principal gas. Please rush medical aid. Emergency decontamination and maintenance required also. But medical aid gets first priority."

From his desk, close by the after observation ports of Vehicle Two—Administration—Commander Mark Fraser, simply by turning his head, could look down upon the other eighteen Vehicles which made up Satellite Space Station Commonwealth Two. By sunlight, moonlight, or starlight the gleaming backs of the other units of his command were clearly visible to the unaided eye—in the assorted forms of spheres, drums, torpedoes, turreted disks, "doughnuts," and spoked wheels, according to their respective functions.

In two hanging echelons they circled Earth every ninety minutes with astronomical precision. From Administration Vehicle at the apex of the upper and leading echelon, they stretched away to port and starboard, each pair a step lower than the pair ahead—like an ever-

widening staircase down to Earth below.

As Fraser listened intently to the radio speaker on his desk, relaying requests from O. C. Thomas and instructions from Administration for the relief of Vehicle Five, he swung his chair around to face directly aft.

Second in line away to his left—two 300-foot spaces back and two 200-foot spaces down—Vehicle Five was a disk eighty feet in diameter and fifteen feet high. From its center projected two cylindrical turrets, one above and one below, each supplied with an airlock. Serenely, Vehicle Five rode in the formation, revealing no sign of the turmoil within.

Commander Fraser attended carefully to each maneuver in the battle being waged by Frank Thomas in the defense of his vehicle and his men. He had no intention of taking part—except, if need be, to speed up some retarded operation by the weight of his authority.

Thomas, the man on the spot, would know what the moves should be—he far better than anyone else. For the time being the resources of the entire Station would be at that hard-pressed spaceman's call, for Commander Fraser knew that his most effective immediate role was to stand by and make sure that Vehicle Five got what it needed without delay.

It was, perhaps, ironical that this should happen to Thomas, whose preoccupation with the probabilities

of meteorite collisions—the main hazard to space-going vehicles and personnel — was notorious. For Frank Thomas was one spaceman who had no faith whatever in the so-called periods of immunity implied by the statistics.

Not that he seriously challenged the statistics themselves. Worked out on paper in the middle nineteen-sixties, they had been confirmed rather than modified by fifty years of intervening practical experience. They had, indeed, been a kind of manual of arms for operating satellite stations and space rockets since Satellite Space Station Commonwealth One had been established in this very ninety-minute orbit.

But Thomas did question certain glib assumptions which were supposed to be based on the statistics, and he could always be relied upon to put up a strenuous argument when his point of view was challenged.

According to the calculations a space-going vehicle presenting a target of approximately one thousand square feet might reasonably expect to be hit by a meteoritic particle of about thirteen millimeters' diameter or larger about once in 611,874 years. Or it might be struck by a particle of some five point twenty millimeters' diameter or larger once in 23,858 years. Or it might even collide with a meteorite the size of a fine sand grain—"1.12 millimeters' diameter," the

statistics said—once in 233 years, on the average.

Fortunately most spacemen anticipated spending little more than ten or twelve years of their lives in space—a few, perhaps, up to twenty years. So they quite naturally rated their chances of never meeting even a sand-grain meteorite as better than an average sailor's chances of never being shipwrecked. According to the statistics, their anticipations were sound enough . . .

"*On the average!*" Frank Thomas would always insist. "Don't forget—the statistics mean nothing if they don't also mean an occasional inevitable hit as well as long periods of immunity! And don't forget, either, that the smallest vehicle here in 'Two' is more than *two* thousand square feet in longitudinal section. I refer to Station Commonwealth One, as you know. Most of us are bigger than three thousand square foot targets. Chemistry Vehicle is five thousand or more. *We* must divide those years of immunity, so called, by five! Our two hundred and thirty-three years become less than fifty!"

"One grain of sand in fifty years!" someone had once protested.

"Traveling at a hundred thousand miles an hour, or more," Thomas had retorted, "even that would sting a bit! And don't forget that 'One' was out here only thirty-two years when something as big as your fist went right through her!"

"According to the statistics," was the reply, given with a grin, "that should make this vicinity safe for anything up to a half million years!"

At that point Thomas would throw up his hands in bitter protest. It was just the kind of gratuitous assumption which never failed to exasperate him.

"*On the average!*" his companions would chorus, knowing what he had in mind to say. And he would grin back, and not say it.

For he had explained too often that, although "once in a thousand years *on the average*" could mean that you might go a thousand years, or two thousand, without a hit, it could just as easily mean that you might collect the quota for two or three thousand years in one day—or one hour. And he had pointed out that if your one meteorite happened to be from a swarm like the Leonids or the Giacobinids, in the season, there would almost certainly be others close by, in space or time . . .

It was therefore inevitable, as Commander Fraser appreciated full well, that from time to time a fragment of cosmic stone or nickel-iron large enough to survive the impact without volatilizing, would whip through one or another of his nineteen vehicles like a bullet through a cardboard box, and then continue on its way.

So a standard procedure for such an emergency had been worked out long since, and personnel had been

drilled in it. And so here he was at his post like any ship's captain on his bridge, in command while the well-planned techniques went into operation.

With pencil and pad he made occasional notes, for there were things to be learned in watching the system function and in observing such innovations as were called forth by the special circumstances of a particular occasion. His confidence in his crews was considerable, and this time he felt reassured because it was Frank Thomas in charge, a man whose special preoccupation with meteorite hazards should make him the right one to handle the emergency.

A movement on the outside of Vehicle Eleven—Medical—which headed the lower echelon, caught his eye. Two space-suited figures, each with a bulky satchel at his back, had emerged through the airlock and were hurrying around to the point nearest Vehicle Five. In a beeline they blasted off without delay.

Realizing that now there was something he could do, Commander Fraser called Communications. "Which Maintenance Vehicle is preparing emergency decontamination and repairs for Vehicle Five?" he asked.

"Vehicle Sixteen," was the reply.

"Get me Officer Commanding Vehicle Seventeen by radio-phone, please . . ."

LIKE BABES in arms the casualties

from Laboratory 4 were brought out by Brocklehurst and Wright and handed over, limp and weightless, to First Aid. Hastily dumping their helmets in wall clips the rescuers reported in person, with the sample of contaminated air, to O. C. Thomas, who had with him Senior Chemist Harrison from Laboratory Seven.

"Here's your sample, Harrison," said Thomas, nodding towards the stoppered flask brought in by Wright. "Give me a quick opinion before the Medical Officer gets here—then a detailed analysis as soon as you can do it."

As Harrison left with the flask Thomas called in the four men standing by in space suits. Then he spoke to Brocklehurst. "What happened to Waddy and Price?"

"They're both unconscious," answered Brocklehurst. "Dr. Waddy has a scalp wound and might be both stunned and gassed. Price apparently gassed. By the smell—you can probably get it now from our clothing—both ammonium chloride and ether are present in quantity. The atmosphere in Lab Four is a white fog, typical of—" He mentioned an equation— NH_4Cl .

"Any idea how it happened?"

"Apparently the meteorite went through their stores bay, smashing some bottles. The air is filled with broken glass, globules of liquids, and—fog."

Thomas called again to Administration. "Please hurry medical aid. We are standing by airlock in Tur-

ret One to take in medical personnel."

"Doctors Buchanan and Seddon approaching your Vehicle now," replied Administration. "They will reach you in about forty seconds."

Thomas nodded to the four men in space suits, who were still holding their helmets in their hands.

"You heard? Get space-tight and proceed, please."

Before the two doctors were properly out of their space suits Brocklehurst had briefed them and handed Harrison's preliminary analysis of the sample of polluted atmosphere to Senior Medical Officer Buchanan.

In the sick bay, with his nostrils twitching at the sting of ammonia, and his eyes keenly scanning the faces of the victims, Buchanan opened his kit at once and took out a rubber bulb syringe and a bladder of sterile water.

"Eyes first," he said to Dr. Seddon. "Wash by squirting water."

Inserting the syringe in the twisted neck of the bladder he filled the syringe. Seddon did likewise with his own equipment. Returning the water bladder Buchanan took out a wad of cotton wool and bent over Price.

"Flush the eyes and then dry quickly," he intoned, suiting his actions to the words. "Flush again, and repeat several times. Never mind where the spray flies as long as it goes away from the eyes."

Drying Price's eyes for the fifth time he returned syringe and cotton

wool to his kit and brought out a tube of unguent.

"Apply anti-burn ointment generously to the eyes," he advised, demonstrating on Price. Then he handed the ointment to Dr. Seddon, wiped his hands on some cotton wool, and drew on sterile rubber gloves.

"Now, while I inspect that scalp wound on your patient, Dr. Seddon, will you please clean up the face and exposed skin of this one and apply a smear of ointment? He's had the worse dose of gas."

"His breathing sounds worse, too," agreed Dr. Seddon. "Much more bubbling."

"Mucous discharge in lungs and bronchial tubes, as we might expect. Better stop it immediately with a shot of atropin—for both of them."

"A hundredth for the worse case — something less for the other?"

"Yes. Say a hundred-and-fiftieth for the lesser one. Or possibly a little more."

Both doctors worked in silence for some minutes. When Dr. Buchanan straightened up from his examination of Dr. Waddy's wound he looked grimly at Brocklehurst.

"Please request Administration to send a workshops tender as an ambulance—and urgently. We'll have to take both patients over to Medical." He turned to Dr. Seddon. "Dr. Waddy has sustained a depressed fracture. Pressure on the parietal lobe, I feel certain. We'll have to trephine. We'll take Price

also—for observation and treatment."

Brocklehurst was already calling O. C. Thomas by intercom. A few moments later he turned to Dr. Buchanan.

"Ambulance tender now making corridor seal with airlock in Turret Two of this Vehicle. We will be ready to receive patients in three minutes."

"Good!" exclaimed Buchanan, and turned again to his patient. Then he straightened up once more. "But surely not—yet? How—so soon?"

Brocklehurst shrugged. "The tender has been standing by alongside for some minutes. With Commander Fraser's compliments. He anticipated the possible need . . ."

Commander Fraser watched as the Chemistry Vehicle's concertina-like corridor tube was unsealed from the ambulance tender's airlock and retracted. Lines fore and aft were cast off and drawn into the tender, and the two space-suited men from Laboratory Eight slowly manhandled the tender away from Vehicle Five.

Slowly the egg-like tender swung about in response to its trimming gyroscopes until its attitude was correct for approach to Vehicle Eleven—Medical. Its jets fluttered for a few seconds only, and as it drifted down towards Medical it slowly turned about again, to approach jets foremost. Precisely the same measured few seconds of firing brought it to a near-stop with-

in yards of Vehicle Eleven, where now three space-suited figures awaited it.

Quickly the lines fore and aft were ejected, made fast, and the tender warped in. Another space-tight corridor connection was made for transfer of the patients.

Back on Vehicle Five two writhing, sausage-like forms ballooned suddenly forth from the outer hatches of two space-cupboards of Laboratory Four, as the polluted air was evacuated from inside.

The outside men removed the two bladders, moored them to the hull of Vehicle Five, and affixed two others. These, a short time later, were similarly inflated, although less tightly than the former two, as the space-suited men inside Laboratory Four operated the hatches in the diminishing, rarefying, and chilling atmosphere.

After six filled envelopes were moored to the outside, both space-cupboards of Laboratory Four were opened to space, and the last faint remnants of the attenuated atmosphere were allowed to go to waste.

The six envelopes of contaminated air had contracted to twisted, rigid "ropes" by the time Commander Fraser returned to his desk six hours later. Having radiated their heat away into space, their contents had contracted, liquified, and frozen into solid incrustations which would later be retrieved, separated chemically, and re-bottled.

Even the broken glass trapped by the wire mesh screens across the

inner hatches of the space-cupboards would be re-melted and blown into laboratory glassware again. For the economics of space-going vehicles is such that it is important to conserve every ounce of material once transported into space rather than expend rocket fuel, in the costly mass-ratios involved in the Earth-to-Satellite ferry services, on one unnecessary ounce.

On Commander Fraser's desk was clipped a brief report and a transcript of the major intercom, radio-phone, and video conversations recorded during the episode aboard Vehicle Five. After perusing these documents and an up-to-the-minute medical report from Dr. Buchanan, Fraser called Communications.

"Leave a message with Vehicle Five asking O. C. Thomas to call me when he returns to duty," he requested.

Moments later, Communications called back: "O. C. Thomas on Vehicle Five is on duty now, Commander. Shall we—?"

"Get him please—on video."

As the screens to the right of their desks cleared simultaneously, Commander Fraser and O. C. Thomas looked one another in the eyes. Thomas was drawn and weary looking.

"Have you rested during the past six hours, Dr. Thomas?" Fraser demanded.

"Well sir—I wanted to be sure everything was ship-shape before—"

"As from now, my boy, you go

off duty for twenty-four hours and get some rest. I'll arrange your relief."

"Thank you, Commander. But I should first inspect the repairs to—"

"Nonsense! Don't be so damned conscientious, Thomas! You can leave those things in charge of the maintenance captain now. He'll have to report to you in any event, later."

"I know sir. But I feel responsible—"

"Your responsibilities on this occasion have been fully discharged long since—and superlatively well, too. Thanks to your prompt handling of the emergency both Waddy and Price will come out of it without permanent injury."

"I am very glad of that news, Commander. Thank you."

"And your Vehicle has been ably defended and commanded," Fraser went on determinedly. "You are to be commended on your handling of the situation. When you are back on duty you can elaborate on some of these notes, and we'll gain a few points to improve Standard Procedure. Your improvisations were excellent, without exception."

"You flatter me, sir. I feel that I merely reacted to each problem as it arose. I had nothing preconceived except Standard Procedure."

"Other than your well-known preoccupation with this very subject! But we'll take that up later. Meanwhile you must go off duty. That is an order!"

Thomas saluted in acquiescence.

"I have only to pass on to Maintenance this requisition for immediate replacement of oxygen and helium lost, or temporarily fouled in flushing Laboratory Four," he said. "We are right out of reserves, so may I count on you, sir, to approve and relay it as urgent? In case of emergency we would be—"

"I shall, of course!" said the commander promptly. "But don't tell me you expect another emergency within twenty-four hours or so!"

Thomas gave a tired grin in answer to the quizzical gleam in his superior's eye. "My obsession on that point is well known, I admit, sir. But it could quite easily—"

The sound of a single, sharp smack, and the sight of the loosely-held papers fluttering from Fraser's hand startled both of them. Withdrawing his hand from his cheek, where it had gone automatically to touch a sharp, stinging burn, Commander Fraser looked in horror at his fingertips.

"Blood!" His eyes again met those of the younger spaceman. Catching a floating sheet of paper he examined it, then held it up to show Thomas a neat, pea-sized hole drilled through it. "I see what you mean!"

Whacking the paper down on his desk he flipped a row of intercom keys.

"Emergency! Attention all personnel, Vehicle Two! Prepare to get airtight! Prepare—to—get—airtight . . .!"

the spectacles

by . . . Frank Belknap Long

In that chill, sunless future Man was a relic under glass. But a museum must have its guardians.

IT WAS A most delightful day, with a crisp autumn tang in the air and Willie felt a joyful lift throughout his entire being. It was forbidden, of course, and he had no right at all to even enter the hall and go romping over its mottled flagstones toward the case and the spectacles. But he simply didn't care.

"Oh, happy me!" he thought. "Oh, joyous day! What do I care if I am caught and punished?"

He was very little and the case was enormous and it glittered in the sunlight from a picture-window that overlooked a many-splendored bay. Beyond the window gulls dipped and wheeled and far in the distance a black buoy rolled with the sea's resistless surge.

It was easy enough to climb into the case and emerge with the spectacles. The glass was shattered over half its length, and the pale mummified brow upon which the spectacles reposed could offer no resistance. Not even the mysterious emanations of thought which had once issued from it could daunt in retrospect so small a thief on such a day as this.

"Oh, glorious, carefree, wonderful me!" intoned Willie.

Frank Belknap Long assures us that this tiny tale was written without the aid of prophetic spectacles or visual props of any kind. You may believe him if you wish. Frankly, we're skeptical. How could we fail to be when we once observed Mr. Long slyly concealing a pair of spectacles quite magically aglow!

Into the case he crawled and out of it he strode triumphant, with the spectacles perched on the bridge of his gladsomely vibrating nose.

"Where will I sit?" he asked himself, looking up first at the sky above, and then down with a pensive wink at the waters which covered the earth.

"Right here by the window. Why not? Big dreams, wonderful dreams, must have room to stretch their limbs and go striding over land and sea like giants in search of their lady loves."

Willie sat down, crossed his small legs and looked out through the spectacles at the sea and the sky.

Almost immediately a ship came into view. It was a very large ship and passengers thronged the rails and white handkerchiefs fluttered in the breeze, and there was a great shouting from the decks and a rejoicing that could not possibly have existed at all if Willie had not been sitting there to take part in it.

"Hello, Willie!" came in a rising chorus. "Isn't it a glorious day? We're heading straight into the sunrise, Willie. Believe it or not, there are palm-fringed islands out there just begging to be explored, and brown-skinned women who would die immediately if no one ever came to make love to them.

"Think of it, Willie. This big round Earth is ours to enjoy for ever and ever."

"I know," said Willie, and waved back. Or rather, he shouted it. "I understand! You don't have

to tell me! I know what it means to be a man, and young and in love. I even know what you're thinking. The women you are holding in your arms wouldn't seem half so wonderful if you couldn't dream of brown-skinned girls too—women you'll never really meet, women who don't even exist."

"Sure, Willie, sure—that's it. But how did you know? How did you even guess? You're just a—"

"Willie, put those spectacles down this minute!" a familiar voice interrupted. "Take them off and give them to me. I'll put them back, and then we'll both have to be very humble, and hope that destruction won't come upon us. You've done a terrible thing, Willie. It's worse than a crime. It's—"

Willie jumped up and took the spectacles off, and gave them to the mother-model. She stood towering over him, sternly severe and reproving, her seven-foot android robot bulk blotting out the sunlight at her back.

"We were made to obey Man—not to try to understand him!" she said.

"But he is gone forever now. He will never return."

"It doesn't matter. We were made to obey."

Willie looked at the mummified figure in the case and his small conical head drooped in resignation. The autumn sky seemed suddenly gray and forbidding and the waters which covered the Earth had become a leaden expanse of emptiness.

seed of tomorrow

by . . . Sam Carson

Ti-5 was a machine and Donn was a towering giant of a man. But one flaming purpose united them: "An Anarch of Gerek must wed!"

DONN WAS rescued by Ti-5 from his state of suspended animation with surprising ease. The bearded red-headed giant tingled throughout all his being as the stimulating frequencies excited his muscles and brain, restoring him to full consciousness. Oddly enough, he wasn't at all pleased. "Durn it," he growled, "it was the best set of dreams I've encountered since we left the galaxy. There were women—fair and tall. And they were all mine. Why did you have to break that up?"

Ti-5 was Donn's sole companion. The creature was a machine-brain entity, encased in the protective framework of a serpentine craft, built of plastics and rare metal combinations from a hundred star systems.

"A carbohydrate planet lies directly ahead, Donn," a speaker explained. "It is in a solar system, grade three."

Donn stretched his arms, and frowned hugely. "We've been crossing the Tul galaxy for twelve full years, Ti," he complained. "What have we found? Life forms, yes—but what kind?" He strode to the tiny dining room at the far end of the corridor. There he tried

A story which juggles the vicissitudes of wild space adventuring with the earthen-crockery magic of an Earth turned primitive is Sam Carson's gift to us here. And just to complete the spell—he adds an enchanting romance.

to relax while servo-mechanisms attended him.

"The system is still too far away to tell us much, Donn," Ti-5 explained patiently. "But I have detected electronic frequencies indicating experience in conveying messages. And they have atomic power."

"Well," Donn muttered, "We've run into that before. Confound it, Ti, I'm convinced my race is a minority everywhere." He caught a disturbing glimpse of his face in a mirror. "For a hundred years I helped police Sus, remember? I'm an *ugly* man, Ti."

"By the standards of the people of Sus and the system of Gerex, that is indeed self-evident, Donn. But it is the policy of your anarchy to find a woman and beget a male."

"I know." Donn got up heavily. "With all the skill of our machine brains, Ti, why can't we breed females? Do you think I enjoy being compelled to chase across galaxy after galaxy in search of a woman meeting your requirements? How I detest that word *chase*."

"The planet I have located," Ti-5 said patiently, "is a sixth-class world. In the great distribution curve of a million years ago, the archives tell us, the small carbohydrate planets in the smaller solar systems were the first to be colonized."

"All right," Donn grunted. "Let's climb into hyper and pay them a visit. But I'll tell you this,

Ti. If we don't find a suitable woman on *this* trip, I'm going back to Sus and re-enter the police service."

"But your father is an anarchy. And his father before him was a leader. You must have a son."

"That's what you say, you infernal mechanical meddler!" Donn grinned, for actually he was quite fond of Ti-5. "Do you think I don't want a mate? It's just that I don't intend to waste the prime of my life chasing through space. I'd rather spend my time smashing intruding life-forms bent on raiding the Geractic worlds. But anything is better, I suppose, than spending my best years in suspended animation." He chuckled. "If it wasn't for the dreams—man, oh man."

Across Tul, a loosely-knit spiral nebula vaster than Andromeda, they raced through hyper space toward a dazzling yellow sun with nine planets. And as Donn fretted, Ti-5 gave out hopeful bulletins. He continued to provide encouragement until the ship left hyper and it was safe to open the screens.

"Observe," he said. "Take careful note of the land mass near their equator."

"Their cities are magnificently laid out," Donn exclaimed. "There are vast networks of highways and canals."

"And women," Ti-5 said gently.

The screen flickered, became stable. There appeared on its opalescent convexity a landscape—with figures. A dozen men and women

reclined at ease on a golden beach. There were swimmers, and boats darting to and fro. There were machines gliding on the land, and through the air.

"Aerial transportation of a crude sort," Ti-5 confirmed.

"Really women—at last," Donn whispered. Excitement possessed him. "Ti, let's measure their atmosphere, their water supply—"

"That has been done already, Donn," Ti-5 assured him. "The gravity is seven-tenths that of our own world. They live in a slightly denser atmosphere. The lakes and rivers are like our own but the ocean is filled with a saline chemical. The salinity is of no importance, however, for the lake water is pure."

"Green continents," Donn said. "Ti, you have done well."

"I am your friend, Donn. Remember, your father rode with me after Ona, your dam."

"Yes, I know." Donn was more emotionally moved than he cared to reveal. He used the scanner with delight, studying the smaller cities, and landscapes dotted with farms. Here was a good type of civilization.

After a moment he turned from the screen which was now aglow with the lights of a public park. There was music, and amusement devices. There were lovers. Handsome young men. Girls who laughed, incredibly attractive girls.

He glanced at the single large mirror which had previously dis-

turbed him. "They wear no beards," he mused. "They are not ugly. But, by the twin suns of Gerex, none are better than I."

The screen blurred. A siren wailed briefly. Then a stern-faced man in uniform materialized, speaking rapidly.

"He is warning them," Ti said. "They have sighted us."

"The fool! Give them the space signal of friendship."

"Donn, you're forgetting that we have penetrated the Galaxy of Tul farther than any explorers before us. They have no knowledge of our signals or linguistics. I am trying to read their thought-patterns. I'm afraid they are hostile."

Ti-5's serpentine bulk was hovering just outside the atmosphere. Presently they saw tiny flames far below as rockets raced toward them. As Ti-5 set the deflectors Donn swore. Rocket after rocket, some of quite formidable dimensions, swerved away and vanished.

"Look, Ti," Donn exclaimed, "they've apparently got some sort of warning system that works on infra-frequencies. As long as we hang around they'll continue to waste their rockets."

"Do you have a plan?" Ti-5 inquired.

"Yes, I have. Let's check an uninhabited area carefully and enter the atmosphere. You'll hover until I make a landing in a lifeboat. Then you'll move out and wait."

"Excellent," Ti said. "A lifeboat would probably be superior in speed

to anything they possess. You'll have ample armament. But we'll have to be careful. I daresay their scanning devices could find me twenty thousand miles away."

"I'll work near their main city, Ti. Can you start your evaluation at twenty thousand?"

"It may be much slower work than you think, Donn. However, I can quickly classify eligible groups of females. The removal of your choice for my inspection—is our major problem, Donn."

Donn laughed softly. "It is a problem I welcome." He was tingling. He craved action—the more dangerous the better. No Gerekian had ever brought back a female of her own accord. And so, as Ti-5 deflected the rocket barrage, Donn climbed into the tiny lifeboat and drifted slowly into the atmosphere.

He and Ti-5 had invaded hostile worlds before, for every citizen of the anarchy served a voluntary enlistment in various dangerous capacities. Donn had even been in Element Survey—a service with a high mortality rating. He had learned the hard way how to sneak in and complete a mission while Ti-5 attracted and misled the defenders.

But this was an exceptionally difficult undertaking. Ti-5 would have to sift the entire group of cities, swiftly but painstakingly. Already the brain machine was analyzing myriads of thought waves, and classifying them for future reference, all in micro-seconds.

Ti-5 would eventually find a woman worth abducting. Meanwhile Donn, gliding down through the ever thickening atmosphere, was concerned more about his immediate physical comfort. The planet's mean temperature at the equator was high, and made itself felt even through his clothing of thin, porous fabric. And now he began to slow the craft, circling the cities. It was dark when he came to rest in open country, and promptly flashed a signal to Ti-5.

Almost as promptly Ti-5 unleashed a space call of distress.

Donn was testing the warm, outside air when he heard the call, which was transmitted not only by telar, but over the accello frequencies. Accello was the penultimate in space transit, for it would leap across thousands of light years in the matter of seconds. From all points in the Gerex System would come help. No organized fleet of the earlier Galactic Empires could have matched the self-discipline of anarchies like Gerex.

"Ti!" Donn shouted on all circuits. "What is it?"

"I—I am dying. They have lethal—lethal weapon—"

The words died out, and Donn saw a great, expanding gout of flame, many-hued, arch through the skies above him.

"Ti," Donn shouted, "Ti, get away as fast as you can! I'll make it. Just look to your own safety."

There was no answer. Donn bowed his head and wept. For once

he was helpless. Then a bitter anger grew within him. Vengeance would not be long delayed. The Gerex ships would come sweeping straight out from the Magellanic Clouds, past great suns, dwarfs, constellations, responding to the distress call Ti-5 had transmitted to a hundred buoys.

But first, he must save himself. He hurried into the small craft, and closed the ports. There was no way he could avoid the risk of overheating atmosphere friction in an immediate takeoff. He might be roasted alive, but he knew that a delay of only a few minutes was not to be countenanced.

Fortunately his fears proved groundless, and he succeeded in reaching the planet's stratosphere with only a slight roaring in his ears to distract him. He was twenty thousand miles out when he saw the Gerex ships closing on the planet, saw their beams raking the tortured perimeters of the cities far below. The very land glowed red, and clouds of steam arose.

For three days the attack continued, with a thousand ships in all delivering death blows. And Donn waited. Finally, as the attack waned, he knew it was time to make himself known.

He tried to signal, but nothing happened. The screens flickered, but no images came through. After hours of signalling he realized that the power failure involved more than just the screen. The surcharge of energy delivered in the ruthless

attack had reached and crippled his lifeboat.

In grim desperation he went into emergency drive. As the lifeboat drifted sluggishly he saw that all firing had ceased and that the Gerex ships were returning across space to their base.

The lifeboat spiraled slowly down toward the planet. Smoke covered the equatorial belt, but he could make out vast green areas divided by seas where there appeared to be no sign of catastrophe. He was glad that the destruction had been directed at the hostile civilization alone.

He came to a region of green plains and winding, silvery-flashing waterways a thousand miles north of the destroyed cities. There were a few isolated villages scattered about—chiefly palm-thatched huts surrounded by tiny fields. He armed himself, and climbed out.

A group of large, four-footed animals were grazing near a fast-moving stream less than forty feet away. Shepherding them, his long hair descending in braids to his shoulders, was a man clad only in the scantiest of garments. He was staring at Donn, and shouting loudly for aid.

Presently a dozen figures, all brandishing spears and carrying shields, emerged from a hut downstream, and came striding along the bank with their coarse garments flapping in the breeze.

Donn had no urge to kill. He undid the blaster from his belt and

aimed it at the soil just ahead of the oncoming barbarians. Flame and dirt rose. The barbarians stopped as Donn etched a trench. Then they wheeled, and fled, some dropping their spears.

"And yet," Donn mused, "they are human. They are far removed from the beasts of the field."

In his small craft Donn covered plains, and clusters of villages, with herds of cattle and farming to sustain them. But nowhere, beyond towering mountain ranges and across lakes and arms of the ocean, did he find a civilization.

Always to the south, a great pall, of smoke and dust, hung over the equatorial belt. Donn skirted the region cautiously, for he was firmly convinced that the entire blasted area would be radioactive. He altered his mind, however, when he climbed for altitude, and saw water where the cities had stood. He was puzzled. "Sus has no such weapon," he mused.

Now he raced across the turbulent sea, above areas which were still boiling. From two points lava erupted, and an ugly chain of islands came into view, their beaches sending up steam. Quickly Donn turned away, back toward country still green. He saw animals, and occasional towns. But there were no roads. The long, winding trails on the checkerboard vista below led to groups of huts and tents.

He did not think that he would ever see his home planet again and

he realized suddenly how desperately he needed the friendly reassurances and advice of Ti-5. But there was no way of reversing Time's tyranny and bringing a vanished friend back to life, and if he was to survive at all he would have to depend on his own resources.

He chose an upland valley, where snow-mantled peaks still caught the sun, and piloted the lifeboat downward. It settled on the shoulder of a great peak. Nearby was a mile-long glacier, its summit ruby-red in the gathering dusk. Donn felt better, for the coolness of the mountain air was refreshing.

He was admiring the glacier when he saw the winged craft come up the valley. It circled the valley twice and then slowly glided to a landing near his lifeboat. Quickly he drew his blaster, and ducked down behind a massive, sheltering boulder.

A woman stepped from the air-car. She wore dark slacks and a fleecy jacket. Her platinum hair streamed in the breeze and she stood for an instant utterly motionless, staring straight at the boulder.

Donn emerged from cover. He holstered the weapon and strode uphill. *She must have belonged to the civilization they destroyed, he thought. She is not here for war, else she would not have emerged unarmed.*

As Donn approached the woman his astonishment mounted. She seemed completely unafraid. Without a word she undid a case hang-

ing from her shoulder, and put on what appeared to be a headset. Then she handed a similar helmeted device to Donn.

He knew instantly that the headsets were thought pattern equipment. Sus used them constantly in dealing with alien life forms. Often they worked. But just as frequently they failed, especially with insect and reptile types. Fortunately, with humanoids the success index was high. Without hesitation Donn put on the headset, noting the compact attachment. Slowly he thought, "I am Donn, from the other great galaxy."

"We are familiar with your world," came to him instantly. "I am Lyda. Why did you make war on us?" Her green eyes were hostile. "Earth is no invader. We have enough grievous trouble of our own. When your ship arrived two great armies were massed in Asia, another in the mountains north of our cities. They were warring on us when your ship attacked."

"Attacked?" Donn stared at her. "Listen to me. I was alone, with the brain machine Ti-5. We deflected your rockets, true. But we did so for the sole purpose of enabling me to land—alone. The ships which destroyed your cities came after you blasted Ti-5. He sent the space call of distress when he was dying."

She looked at the gilded peaks, her face impassive. "That was what my father told me, Donn. He was Orr, chief physicist of the Ten Cities. Unfortunately the military

refused to believe him. They trained on your ship the disintegrator which he had developed as a defensive weapon against the invading hordes."

"I am sorry," Donn said. "Even when Ti signaled that he was mortally injured I begged him not to send out the distress call. Our ships crossed the entire galaxy to join with us in exacting revenge. They abandoned me, believing I was dead."

She gestured toward the lifeboat. "I would like to examine that curious, small craft," she told him.

Donn led the way. Within, she noted the simple equipment, and the questions she asked amazed him.

"I was Orr's assistant," she said, smiling. "We had planned to build a far more elaborate space craft than this, using the energy developed in the disintegrator as a power drive."

"Then why—"

"There was a reason for our failure," she went on, her face sad. "For years the Ten Cities have been in the hands of men with a remorseless lust for power. They envisioned war as the solution to everything. The moment we defeated the Asiatics, our own power-hungry leaders would have fallen out."

"Your cities appeared peaceful enough on our screens," Donn said.

She leaned forward. "Why did you come so far, and alone? Why did you dare so greatly and risk

so much—if you were on a peaceful mission?"

"To find a mate," Donn answered her bluntly. For the first time she appeared startled. Then her eyes grew luminous with amazement.

"I still do not understand. Surely your own women—"

Donn told her the simple truth. She stared at him aghast. "You would have kidnapped a woman, taken her as a captive back to your Sus—"

"Look at me," Donn cut in harshly. "Do you think a man as ugly as myself could have persuaded an Earth woman to accompany him of her own free choice, in competition with the specimens I saw on our screens?"

"Your screens showed only our aristocrats, owners of slaves, proprietors of our factories. You saw them at play. My father was no aristocrat. He was a commoner. A genius, yes, but still a commoner.

"Donn," she added, her eyes no longer hostile, "your coming brought disaster. But you were merely an instrument of the tragedy and not its real cause."

Donn returned her stare incredulously. "Why do you say that? Your civilization is now on the floor of the sea. Before we struck—"

"Long before you struck the angry matrix of rock and metal beneath the thin crust of the continent threatened us, Donn. Orr believed, as did others before him, that the Ten Cities had been built on the most critical of Earth's surface. The

atomic-powered blasts from your ships triggered the actual convulsion. But Atlantis was doomed from the beginning."

"Atlantis!" Donn spoke the word aloud. "So that was the name of your civilization! In the archives at Sus there is frequent mention of Atlantis, and of a Gerex-born rebel who fled to your galaxy of Tul."

She nodded. "He was our ancestor, Donn. And that is why the Ten Cities of Atlantis have known nothing but war. We were unlike the original inhabitants, and they sensed our alienage."

She rose and went outside. Donn followed her and switched on a hand-lamp which glowed a soft green. "How many of you got away?" he inquired. "Was your father a survivor?"

She nodded. "We left together—after warning the military. They refused to believe us. Orr had his own ship, but he risked too much by returning for documents and equipment. He was planning to build a laboratory in these mountains.

"He fearlessly exposed himself to the radiations, putting his own safety last. He—he died last night," she added, her voice trembling. "And he asked me to find you."

Donn took her unresisting hand. It was cold. They walked past her aircar to a ledge a hundred feet above the glacier, resplendent now in the moonlight.

"You are very beautiful, Lyda,"

he said. "It would be a joy to help you build your laboratory, and serve you as a husband should. But I am a man of truth, Lyda. Ti-5 must have chosen you, the rascal—before we reached this solar system. He was good at keeping a secret."

Her fingers tightened, but only for a moment. "I am not a woman to be abducted, Donn. I accept you, but on my own terms. Serve me?" She laughed gently. "On Earth, when a man seeks a mate, he pays court."

"Pays court?" he asked, perplexed.

"It is an art you will quickly master," she said. "Right now, I have some small, practical matters

to attend to, my darling." She ran to an aircar.

Donn went to the lifeboat. Before entering, he lifted his head. The Gerex Galaxy was a single dot of light. The constellations of Tula—Monoceros, Cygnus, Aquarius, Orion, seemed to be pleading with him to stay. But a man cannot desert his own people forever. She was very lovely, and she tugged at his heartstrings. But—

"Goodbye," Donn whispered. "Some day, the children of Gerex will visit you. Some day. And I will be with them, looking for you."

He took off, knowing in his heart that if he dared greatly the small craft would take him home.

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FU 64

the neurotic rose

by . . . H. Nearing, Jr.

Not many men could have grown a plant that was half a dog—or a dog that was half a flower. But Ransom was a botanical-genius!

"SEE," said Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, of the Mathematics Faculty, "just like a nasty little kid on a hunger strike."

Professor Archibald MacTate leaned over the flower on the windowsill of his colleague's office and examined it closely. It looked something like a large rose, but its petals were shaggy with reddish brown hair, oddly reminiscent of hound's ears. The center protruded conically, like a snout, and was slitted by two rows of white teeth. It had a doggy smell.

"What is it, old boy?" MacTate asked. "The aroma's not exactly rosy."

"Well, he's not quite a rose anymore." Ransom held a grasshopper in front of the flower's snout again and sighed when the thing twisted its thick, sinewy stem and turned coldly away. "I don't know what's wrong with him. He used to eat a grasshopper every day. Terrific appetite—when you consider it takes a Venus fly-trap two weeks to digest a meal. But yesterday he went on a hunger strike, and I can't do a thing with him."

A food-and-sex complex in the vegetable kingdom may not have quite the same dark Freudian significance as neuroticism on a human plane. But can we be completely sure that plants can't go haywire too—from repressions too intolerable to be borne? H. Nearing, Jr., in his first story for us—and a brilliant story it is!—almost convinces us that men and plants can become psychotic buds on the same stem, and quite possibly dogs as well!

Ransom ran an experimental finger along the support stick to which the flower's neck had once been securely tied by a string, now broken. "The creature acts hungry sometimes, though," he conceded. "See these nibbles on the stick." He pulled the stick out of the flower pot and pointed at the tooth marks along the edge. "Well, he doesn't need a support now anyway."

He went to his desk, put the grasshopper into a glass jar and tossed the stick into the wastebasket.

"But you mean it *was* a rose?" said MacTate, staring at it incredulously.

"Sure. It grew from a seed. What else could you start with if you wanted to cross a plant with an animal?"

MacTate looked at him. "I'm not sure I—"

"Psychology, MacTate." Ransom sat down in his swivel chair, stuck out his little round belly and began to swing. "Tell me"—he aimed a finger at his colleague—"why do dogs show more intelligence in some tests than they actually possess? Did it ever occur to you it's because they've been pampered and flattered for centuries? They're not prisoners or slaves like the other animals, but man's best friend. So on those tests they knock themselves out trying to make a good showing for their friend, see?"

His eyes narrowed. "Now—what flower is like a dog in that respect? What flower has been bred

in more than three thousand varieties, and become the symbol of the gooiest human sentimentality and pampering?" He nodded. "You have guessed it. If you want to cross a plant and an animal, you take man's two best friends and persuade them to cooperate. The dog and the rose."

"But—" MacTate looked dubiously at the flower, and then back at Ransom. "I don't want to seem critical, but just why should you want to cross a plant with an animal?"

"Well, just out of scientific curiosity—for one reason."

"I'm more interested in the next reason." MacTate sat down in front of Ransom's desk, crossed his long legs and lit a cigarette.

"All right, MacTate. It's Mrs. Underdouble. She's Chairman of the Flower Show crowd, as you know. She's been reading these anti-science books, and the other day she told the Woman's Club that scientists were helpless infants outside their own little chosen fields. She said that no mathematician, for instance, had ever won a prize at the Flower Show."

"What were you doing at the Woman's Club, old boy?"

"Well, we were sort of debating for them. On the Scientific Way of Life."

"Who won?"

"Nobody—yet. Suspended verdict. I bet her a crow-eating preface to the anti-science book she's writing that I could quite easily win

a prize at the Flower Show." Ransom waved at the dog-rose on the windowsill. "If he can't win a prize—"

"What did she bet?" MacTate asked.

"Oh, one of her stud dogs. An Irish spaniel." Ransom looked reflectively at the dog-rose.

MacTate whistled. "High stakes!"

"He's not doing so well right now. The spaniel; I mean. He had a nervous breakdown not long ago. I don't know exactly why, but he actually made more money last year in stud fees alone than you and me together."

Ransom grinned. "Anyway, I told her I knew a dog doctor who wouldn't charge a broken-down college professor as much as he would the chairman of a flower show, so she lent him to me for a course of treatments. He's a nice dog. Name's C-u-a-i-l-g-n-e, pronounced Cooley. His first name, that is. I don't remember all of it."

At the sound of "Cooley" there was a rustling under Ransom's desk, and a large dog covered with reddish brown curls peered around its oaken base at MacTate.

"There he is," Ransom chuckled. "Heard us talking about him." He slapped Cooley's haunch affectionately.

MacTate looked at his colleague with a suspicious eye. "Just who is this 'dog doctor' you're taking him to, Ransom?"

"Me." Ransom grinned. "Who else? I'm giving him the best treatment in the world. A little brandy now and then and a little exercise chasing rats down interesting alleys. I've opened up new horizons for him."

MacTate eyed the dog-rose on the windowsill again. "I see."

Ransom followed his glance. "Listen, MacTate. That's why I wanted to talk to you. I think she's suspicious, and if she ever drops in here to check up I don't want her to see *that*." He pointed at the dog-rose. "So—how about taking him to your office for a while. The rose, not the spaniel. Maybe it'll improve his appetite to live in a philosophical atmosphere."

"But, old boy, wouldn't the University hothouses be a better place to—"

"No, no. Mrs. Underdouble is always going there. Ever since she endowed that chair in Botany they have given her the run of the place, and one of her favorite sports is taking her friends on guided tours through the hothouses. She'd find it there as quick as on the windowsill."

"But what difference would it make if she *did* find it?"

"Don't you understand? She'd charge me a *stud fee*, MacTate."

"Aha!" MacTate pointed triumphantly at the dog-rose. "I see it all now. Cooley is one of the parents of *that*."

"My God, MacTate, where have you been? Didn't you notice the

resemblance right off? The thing's the spitting image of Cooley."

MacTate frowned. "But how in the name of heaven—"

"Well, I mixed some genes with this supersonic needle. You know. And then I encouraged him with autocoids from Cooley's blood after he started to grow. The rose, I mean. Pure breeds on both sides. Thoroughly pampered. A few more transfusions and he ought to— Oh, that reminds me. I've got to get Cooley some more hamburger."

Ransom looked speculatively at the windowsill. "I only take a couple ounces of his blood each time, but it seemed to make him tired. So I tried putting it back—"

"Putting what back?" MacTate looked up.

"The blood, of course. I'd give the rose a transfusion from Cooley and then give him a transfusion from the rose, to even things up. But then I found out that if I just fed him enough hamburger he didn't need the blood back. And yesterday I got him two pounds—" Ransom waved at a deep-freeze box under the windowsill. "I put the meat right there but it mysteriously disappeared."

MacTate looked at the box. "How long has this been going on? The transfusions."

"Several weeks." Ransom got up and looked around the box. "I put it right on top of the deep freeze to thaw and then got called down to the Dean's office, and when I came back—"

"Maybe Cooley got tired of waiting."

Ransom shook his head. "I took Cooley with me to introduce him to the Dean. He wasn't here. Well, anyway"—he went to the closet in the corner of his office and took out an old newspaper—"we've got to get him some more meat right away." He wrapped the newspaper in a cylinder around the dog-rose and tied it securely with a string. "And we can drop this off at your office on the way back. Come on, Cooley. You can go along." He picked up the dog-rose and led the way out.

They went to a meat market not far from the campus and lined up at the counter behind a stout woman with unkempt hair who was buying a steak. She had a beery aroma and carried a bottle-shaped package under one arm. The butcher cut her a steak, weighed it, plopped it on the counter and turned to get some wrapping paper.

There was a paper-tearing sound that seemed to begin before the butcher reached the wrapping roll. When he actually tore off a sheet for the meat, the sound of the rip had a slightly different timbre. He turned back to the counter and reached for the steak.

"Hey," said the beery woman. "What's this? A clip joint?" She pointed indignantly at the steak.

The butcher scratched the black fuzz on his right arm, and shaped an astonished O with his fat lips. A neatly semicircular portion of the

steak, about an inch in diameter, was missing from its left edge.

"What do you do?" said the woman accusingly. "Sneak a little of each sale home for your dog?"

"Dog?" The butcher looked at Cooley, who was waiting patiently beside Ransom. Then he looked at Ransom, and his eyes popped. "Say—"

"What are you talking about?" Ransom scowled. "My dog was sitting right here beside me since we came in. And a dog's bite doesn't look like that, even if he could jump that high. Look—" He shifted the dog-rose to his left arm and stepped aside to point to the height of the counter. The movement brought him next to a glass case exhibiting salami and cheese.

MacTate heard a rustling in the cylinder of newspaper Ransom was holding. From a rip in the paper protruded a reddish brown snout. It twisted toward a roll of liverwurst that lay on top of the glass case and took a bite of it. "Old boy—"

Ransom's attention was occupied elsewhere.

"Looks like a dog's bite to me," said the angry butcher, studying the steak. He picked it up and came around the counter toward Cooley. "Open his mouth and we'll just—"

Cooley eyed the advancing butcher with mistrust and started to back away.

"Cooley," Ransom shouted. "Stand still. He can't—"

Startled, Cooley dodged back in-

to a large pyramid of dogfood cans, knocking them all over the floor in an irregular drumroll of tinny bangs.

"Ransom—" MacTate grabbed his colleague's arm and pointed to a little dressed chicken that was disappearing through the rip in the newspaper cylinder. "It was up here by this." He pointed at the bite in the roll of liverwurst.

Ransom jerked his bundle away from the glass case and then looked around at Cooley, who was leaping up on a shelf laden with jars of olives.

"Cooley! Come down here! Cooley!" The jars crashed juicily as Ransom continued to retreat from the butcher.

"I thought you said he couldn't jump," said the butcher.

"Cooley, do you hear me? Come here."

Ransom lunged after the dog, but slipped on the spilled olives and dived into the beery woman, knocking her and her bottle-shaped bundle to the floor. The bundle began to lose its bottle shape, and a winey smell mingled with the beery aroma.

Cooley leaped off the olive shelf, sniffed at the liquid oozing through the paper around the broken wine bottle, and began to lick it.

"Good heavens, old boy. Have you made an alcoholic of him?"

"Never mind, MacTate. *Help me grab him.*"

Ransom, MacTate and the butcher converged on Cooley together, while the beery woman on the floor

screamed a kind of war song in accompaniment. They seized various parts of Cooley's anatomy and pulled him away from the oozing wine.

"What are you doing to that animal?"

They looked up. A large woman in an immense hat had entered the store and stood-glaring at them. Her jaw and her bosom vied for first place in her horizontal projection.

"As for you, Ransom—"

"Look, Mrs. Underdouble, I can explain—"

"Explain why you are introducing a priceless dog to Bacchanalian orgies in a delicatessen?" She wrapped her arms around Cooley and heaved him off the floor. "A good thing I was passing—" She ran out of breath because of Cooley's weight. Glaring at Ransom, she turned and staggered to the door.

The beery woman, still shrieking, got off the floor and picked up a can of dogfood to hurl after them. Ransom caught her arm.

"Mrs. Underdouble," he called. "Wait. You can't take Cooley yet. He—MacTate." He turned and thrust the dog-rose into his colleague's arms. "Take care of all this. I'll see you later."

He sprinted to the door in Mrs. Underdouble's wake and dived into a large black car just as it pulled away from the curb.

MacTate looked at the debris on the floor, at the beery woman, and at the butcher. He sighed. "Send

your bill to Professor Ransom at the University. That's a sufficient address. Everybody knows him."

The butcher surveyed the mess. "That I can believe."

MacTate left quietly with the dog-rose. He went to his office, set the gorged flower on his window-sill and took the torn newspaper off it. As he locked his office he reflected joyfully that it was Friday. Ransom would be unable to implicate him in anything for two whole days. As he turned away from the door he heard a peculiar grating sound inside his office. Mice? Well, the dog-rose could eat them.

Monday morning, as he unlocked his office, he heard the phone ringing inside. He went in and answered it.

"MacTate." It was Ransom. "She's finally decided to let me have Cooley again. I—explained everything. So we can give the rose another transfusion. How is he?"

"Well . . ." MacTate turned and looked at the windowsill. The dog-rose was perched precariously on a circular projection directly under its pot. All the rest of the wooden sill within a radius of two feet had been chewed away. "Good heavens, Ransom, you'd better get over here. *Right way.*"

Ransom was there in four minutes flat. "My God." He stared at the mutilated windowsill. "Remember those nibbles on the support stick? Apparently it has taken to eating *wood!*"

"The change in diet hasn't agreed with it, either." MacTate pointed at the flower, which was lolling foolishly to one side of its bulging stem.

Its shaggy petals were disheveled and its jaws slightly parted. Suddenly there was a spasm in its stem and it emitted a loud hiccough. Its petals shot erect for a moment as if startled, then collapsed and bobbed idiotically up and down.

"MacTate—do you smell something?" Ransom asked, sniffing.

"Yes." MacTate sniffed too. "A little like applejack, isn't it?"

Ransom stared at the flower. "My God, *that's* what he did with the wood. The thing's *drunk*."

MacTate shook his head. "What a digestive system." He looked at Ransom. "Old boy, you don't think it could be hereditary? The way Cooley went for that wine—"

"No, no." Ransom examined the dog-rose's stem. "See those blisters? Edema. My God, why didn't I think of that?"

"What do you mean, Ransom? What's wrong with it?"

"Beriberi." Ransom lifted its petals to look at the corolla. "I forgot he had enough animal in him to need vitamins. So he's got alcoholic polyneuritis. We've got to feed him lots of thiamin, quick." He looked around. "But where can we keep him meanwhile? If he grows enough to eat the rest of your windowsill. MacTate—" He aimed a finger at his colleague. "I've got it. *Her* hothouse."

"Whose hothouse, Ransom?"

"Mrs. Underdouble's, of course. It's all plastic and cement. No wood. And it's like Poe's 'Purloined Letter.' She'd never dream of looking in her own—"

"But, old boy, surely she inspects her own flowers from time to time."

"Of course she does. But this will only be overnight. Tomorrow I can dose him up with vitamins and take him down to the Flower Show."

"Didn't you say it needed another transfusion from Cooley, too?"

"We can give him one out there. That's where Cooley is now. We can take him out and bring Cooley back with one trip." Ransom looked at the dog-rose. "MacTate, have you got anything we could put over him. I'm afraid if we wrap him in wood-pulp—"

MacTate went to his closet. "I think I have a—yes. Here it is." He took out a shabby golf bag. "Will this do?"

"Fine." Ransom put the dog-rose into the bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Come on. We've got to keep moving."

When they arrived at the suburb where Mrs. Underdouble had her estate, Ransom parked under a row of trees beside the highway. "We'd better sneak up the back road to her greenhouse first," he said descending from the car. "It's right up here."

He went to the end of the row

of trees and turned up a dirt road between high banks laden with ragweed and poison ivy. "The dangerous part is up here where the road runs nearest to the house," he warned. "Keep your head down."

MacTate noticed that the banks beside the road were becoming lower. He stooped a little, while Ransom bent over like an Indian tracker.

"Oof." Before Ransom could leap aside or back he suddenly tripped and went sprawling headlong on the dusty soil. He arose swearing and began to slap the dust off his clothes. "I don't know why the hell she—"

"Ransom," someone called from the house on the right.

"You forgot and stood up, old boy." MacTate reminded him. He pointed toward the house. "Look."

Mrs. Underdouble was sitting on the front porch regarding them through a pair of binoculars.

Ransom sighed. "Let's go, MacTate."

They stepped up on the bank and crossed the field to Mrs. Underdouble's lawn.

"Ransom," she said, eyeing the golf bag. "I didn't know you played that nauseating Republican game."

"No, no, Mrs. Underdouble," he murmured apologetically, ascending the porch steps. "We're—out studying nature." He laughed depreciatingly. "This golf bag is just to keep specimens in." He noticed

that she was holding a large Siamese cat on her lap.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the golf bag. It bulged over its entire length as it was battered in various directions by blows from within.

"Specimens of what?" demanded Mrs. Underdouble, studying the bag.

"Smells the cat," Ransom whispered to MacTate. "Oh," he said, turning to Mrs. Underdouble, "this and that. We—"

He was interrupted by a loud rip, and immediately thereafter a long slit appeared in the golf bag. Frantically he grabbed both sides of the slit and held them together with his hand.

"Ransom," she said, "you are a madman. Oh, and that reminds me. *What have you done to Cooley?*"

He stared at her. "What do you mean what have I done to him? I haven't—"

"You'd better come over here and see." She put the cat down, got up and led the way across the lawn to the rose bushes flanking the hothouse. She reached into several of the bushes and finally held the branches of one of them aside, pointing. "Just look there!"

Cooley was sitting under the bush with an expression of narcissistic beatitude in his eyes.

"What's he doing under that rose bush?" said Ransom. "How did he get out of the kennels?"

"He howls until he's turned loose and then comes over here

and sits." Mrs. Underdouble glared at him. "Explain, Ransom."

"Well, I—" There was a batting inside the golf bag again. Ransom tightened his grip on the slit.

"And precisely *what* is in that bag?" She demanded for the second time, and he could see that she was at the end of her patience.

"Well—"

A phone saved him by ringing in the office adjoining the hothouse.

"Oh—" She grimaced with resentment. "You'd better be thinking up some answers, Ransom." She relinquished her hold on the rose-bush and went into the office.

"Cooley." Ransom pulled the branches aside. "MacTate. My God, those double transfusions. He thinks he's a rose."

MacTate leaned over to stare down intently at Cooley. Then he pointed to a number of little tendrils curling out of the dog's ears. "Maybe he is, old boy."

Ransom turned pale. "Stamens! I—Listen, MacTate, we can worry about Cooley later. Let's sneak the rose into the hothouse while she's gone." He led the way into the hothouse. "Here. We can put him behind the Brazilian trumpet creeper."

He took the dog-rose out of the golf bag and thrust it under a cluster of bright orange flowers growing on the tendrils of a large vine. "Now when she comes back—"

"*Ransom, what are you doing in here?*" Mrs. Underdouble came belligerently into the hothouse. "It's for you."

He stared at her. "What's for me? I don't understand—"

"The *telephone*, of course. The call was for you."

"But—no one knew I was coming here."

"I did—and I told her. It's the secretary of the Flower Show Steering Committee. They can't understand your entry form. The description of you—"

"When did they start worrying about that?"

Mrs. Underdouble turned to the trumpet creeper and began to finger the orange flowers. "Oh, just checking."

"Now I wonder who put them up to that." Ransom gave her a dirty look and went down to the office.

She turned to MacTate. "Have you known Ransom long?" She asked.

MacTate sighed. "Years and years," he said, his gaze on a slight movement among the orange flowers behind her.

"Don't you feel that he is sometimes a bit—well, overenthusiastic?"

"I suppose you might say—" MacTate stopped. The orange flowers had begun to shake violently.

Mrs. Underdouble turned with a startled exclamation. "My creeper! What has he done *now*?" She pushed the flowers aside, her lips tightening.

The dog-rose had sunk its teeth into the woody stem of the vine and was jerking at it hungrily.

"What *is* that thing?" Mrs. Underdouble almost screamed the words. "Get it out of here." She grabbed the vine and tried to pull it away from the locked jaws.

Ransom came back into the hothouse. "What were you screaming about?" he asked.

"It's eating her creeper," said MacTate, reproachfully. "I thought you were going to keep it away from wood."

"How was I to know he'd eat wood while it's still *alive*?" Ransom yanked the dog-rose away from the vine, his color rising.

Mrs. Underdouble, still pulling, bumped abruptly to the floor. "Ransom—"

"Here, MacTate." Ransom dropped the dog-rose into the golf bag and handed it to his colleague. "Pick up Cooley and take them both to my office. Here's the key. I'll see you later."

He turned to help Mrs. Underdouble, who was staring in horror at the place where the dog-rose had been.

"Ransom. That wasn't your *entry*? Not *that*?"

"Look, Mrs. Underdouble, I can explain everything. You see—"

MacTate slipped quietly out of the hothouse. And back in Ransom's office, he set the dog-rose and Cooley, who was apparently satisfied with just one rose for a companion, side by side on the deep-freeze box. Then he pulled the box well away from the windowsill, sighed, and went home.

The next morning, as he was about to cross the street on the way to his office, he saw Ransom's car heading for him. He hopped back on the curb just as Ransom pulled up with a screeching of brakes.

"MacTate." Ransom got out of the car and slammed the door. "How's the rose? Did you give him any vitamins?"

MacTate noticed that his colleague was carrying a brown bottle and a large book under his arm. The book was titled *Einführung zum Pflanz und Tiereinteilungsgrund*. "Well, no, old boy," he said. "You didn't say anything about—"

"My God! Let's get to him." Ransom swung about, and headed for his office.

"You mean," said MacTate, following close at his heels, "that you haven't been to your office since—"

"How could I?" Ransom demanded. "I've been spending all my time working up a case." He hefted the book as he spoke, his expression somber.

"Case?"

"For the rose, yes. She claimed he couldn't qualify as a plant anymore and this morning she hauled me before the committee for an eligibility ruling. I forgot all about his vitamins until just now." Ransom flourished the brown bottle again.

"What did the committee decide?" MacTate insisted on knowing.

"Well, it came down to sex." Ransom turned up the stairs to his office. "They figured it wasn't so much a matter of whether he was a plant or an animal, but of whether he was a *flower*. You see, the simplest flower known is the spurge. It hasn't got anything but a single stamen or a single pistil. No petals or anything else. So they said if I could find either a stamen or a pistil on the rose they would qualify him. Do you remember if he had any?"

MacTate thought. "No. All I remember is that Cooley had stamens in his ears. But he must have got them from the—"

"My God, what's that?"

They were just outside Ransom's office. From inside came a lugubrious howl.

"Give me the key, MacTate," Ransom said urgently, holding out his hand.

MacTate gave him the key. He unlocked the office door and flung it open.

In the flower pot on the deep-freeze box there was only a clotted stump. Beside it lay a tangle of what looked like old brown paper. Cooley sat behind the box mourning his lost companion.

"What happened, old boy? *That* isn't your rose?"

"All that's left of him," Ransom said. He leaned over and patted Cooley sympathetically. "He couldn't get wood for a jag anywhere else, so he ate himself. If only I'd remembered those damned vita-

mins. Now we'll never know if he had stamens or—"

"Well, it must have had something," said MacTate. "Odd. In this light the color is practically identical to—"

"What are you talking about, MacTate?" Ransom interrupted. "What color?"

"This." MacTate brushed away a wisp of the withered debris beside the stump. "It's like the flowers on that vine it was eating in the hothouse."

From the side of the stump grew a slender tendril topped by little orange petals. If there was any hair on them it was still too fine to see. But in their precise center was a pair of diminutive brown jaws. As they watched, a fly buzzed past. The jaws darted at it and made a little click—and the fly vanished.

"My God," said Ransom, "he's had a baby."

"*What's* had a baby, Ransom?" said a voice behind them, causing them to turn in consternation.

Mrs. Underdouble had come into the office. "If you're talking about Cooley, I quite agree. That horrible thing you had in the hothouse yesterday looked just like him, so I suppose you *could* call it his baby. Now as you know, the stud fee—" She looked at the remains of the dog-rose. "What's that?" she demanded.

"What's left of my entry," said Ransom.

"Dead? That really is too bad." She clucked her tongue, grinning.

"Did it have stamens or— Stop that, Ransom. What are you doing?" She slapped his hand away from the withered petals he had been trying to pull over the orange baby. "What's that?"

"All right. You'd find out sooner or later. It's my new entry."

"Orange. Like the—" She stared at it. "Ransom, do you know what my scion fee is for the trumpet creeper?"

"Look, Mrs. Underdouble, you can't prove—"

"What? Look at the color. You don't deny that you had your monster out mutilating my trumpet creeper, do you? Anyway, you can't enter *that*."

Ransom scowled. "What do you mean? If you admit it's the offspring of your trumpet creeper it's got to be eligible."

"Ah-ah. That's not the point, Ransom. Does it have stamens or pistils?"

Ransom looked startled. He bent over the little orange dog-creeper and examined it. "It's *got* to have something," he said, desperately. "Wait a couple of days. It's just a bud now. It—"

"No entries can be accepted for prize competition after today, Ransom." Mrs. Underdouble laughed

nastily. "But don't worry about the creeper fee. Cooley's services will cost you enough." She went to the door. "I'll send you a bill," she said, and left.

"It's a shame the rose ate itself," said MacTate. "Because it was old enough to have had stamens. Come to think of it, it must have had them if it gave them to Cooley."

"What?" Ransom looked startled.

"Don't you see? How could Cooley have picked up stamens from the dog-rose if it didn't have any itself? He—"

"MacTate." Ransom was staring at Cooley, who had fallen asleep behind the deep freeze. "Come on." He grabbed MacTate's arm. "Let's get over to the drug store before the lunch crowd hits it."

"Drug store? Why?"

"We've got to get some dye for Cooley, so she won't recognize him until after the awards."

"But why—"

"Think, MacTate. What did the committee say? Anything with stamens. All right." Ransom pulled him out the door. "We're entering Cooley in the Flower Show. If he wins himself for us she can't charge us a stud fee. Can she?"

the
ninety-
minute
war

by . . . Richard E. Lowe

The war was as swift and as unexpected as a thunderclap in January. But its very brevity shook a spaceman's universe.

SCATTER A handful of diamonds and rubies loosely on a velvet cloth, and then, a short distance away, drop a grain of dirt. Do that, and you'll have a fair approximation of the universe ruled by Tarr, biggest ruby of them all, and her sister planets. And the grain of dirt would be the tiny world of Likk.

Would any man, in his right mind, given free choice of the rubies and diamonds choose Likk as the planet of his heart's desire?

Yet the scrubby planet of Likk, scarcely a thousand miles in circumference, did have certain advantages—of one kind, perhaps, to a man on the run from the justice of Kursh of Tarr, and quite another to a venerable citizen, scientist and scholar like Eldo Lite.

To the first man it meant safety from pursuit; to the second, security from intrusion. And the same natural circumstances served both, for Likk was on the fringe, and yet not really a part of the Universe of Tarr. It had never been claimed or settled by Kursh or any of his predecessors in the

In his boyhood Richard Lowe was determined to be an engineer—until he dipped into trigonometry in high school and decided that journalism was more to his liking. A colorful and varied career as a newspaperman followed, interrupted by five years of soldiering. He resides in Miami, and despite a "noisy and spirited" family of youngsters manages to write science fiction of exceptional merit. There's an astounding vigor in Eldo Lite, hermit extraordinary.

long age of universal expansion. In fact, it was difficult to imagine a planet tinier or more useless than Likk, with its spongy interior and atmospheric envelope of thick, muggy fog.

It was enveloped always in perpetual twilight, for it was blessed not only with the suns that shone on the planets of Tarr, but with a larger orb of first-magnitude brightness, hovering close to the rim of another universe. Together the many suns heated Likk around the clock, and from the spongy mass beneath its crust came moisture, oozing, to condense into heavy clinging layers of vapor mist thirty miles thick.

But if a man wanted solitude, Likk was an ideal retreat. The food problem was negligible—for edibles grew wild and a man could thrive simply by hardening his will and burying his longing for meat. And the money problem didn't even exist, for how could money benefit anyone when there was no need for taxes to pay for the building of roads, or fleets of massive spaceships for commerce and for war.

As for the space drifters and the traders who visited Likk with occasional supplies from Tarr—a cargo hold of ore sent them away happy. Yet there was not enough ore to justify colonial expansion and development. Happy Likk!

There was no need even for jails. Likk itself was a giant prison, its inmates voluntarily sentenced

by their own peculiar temperaments to months or years of solitude.

So Eldo Lite was happy, naturally. He had been ever since that memorable day, twenty years before, when he had tired of the glories and honors and brilliancies of life at the court of Kursh, and had consigned his past to history at the age of seventy-six. On that day he had manned his single-place spaceshooter and journeyed out on the long sky voyage to Likk.

It had taken Eldo Lite only six months to solve the problem of the fog. He had utilized one of his own discoveries—Element 113. By patient experimentation and by shooting bombarding particles of that unusual isotope into a mixture of hydrogen, oxygen and one or two obscure bits of matter, he had succeeded in creating a molecular dispeller.

Wherever this machine functioned all the wet, clinging, disagreeable fog dispersed as if by magic, lifting upward and outward like a huge umbrella fifty feet in diameter. And with the fog gone Likk became a more pleasant place to live. Beneath a vast network of air bubbles Lite found that he could move freely about, breathing good air, and it wasn't long before his tortured sinuses gratefully settled back to normal.

For nineteen years Eldo Lite and his companions lived an easy, relaxed and relatively carefree life on

Likk—until one day, pussyfooting timidly down through the upper layers of fog, there descended a long, black cruiser from Tarr.

It disgorged a crew of stern-faced spacemen who proceeded to erect a radio station, and the officer in command promptly informed the startled original colonists that Likk's days of solitude were over. Kursh of Tarr, it appeared, was embarking on a new era of conquest, reaching out for the universe next door. In fact, Likk was already marked on Kursh's maps as Re-supply Depot Number One in the long line of worlds to be conquered. In a matter of days, the advance commander assured Lite, more ships would arrive and huge storehouses would be built, and little Likk would become an active military base.

"A matter of days," muttered Eldo Lite to himself, glowering in bitter anger at the litter of equipment on the long bench in the laboratory he had built to enlarge the horizons of his still vigorous mind. For Eldo Lite, though old, was younger mentally than most men half his age.

He stroked the back of the furry *basik* he kept for a pet, and the round little animal blinked uncomprehendingly up at him. Happy beast, thought Eldo—too small to get in the way, all bones and skin and fur and thus no temptation to the appetite.

"A matter of days," he repeated, and went resolutely to work.

Long years ago Eldo had conceived a daring idea which he now set about executing. He had shelved the original plans because he had grown weary of aiding Kursh of Tarr in his conquests and ambitions. But the challenge now was of more vital concern to him.

He took a spare dispeller and dismantled it. To the combustion chamber, where his Element 113 ceaselessly bombarded the hydro-oxy core, he carefully added another rare isotope which he called Eldurium—a substance unknown to anyone else in all the worlds of Tarr.

Painstakingly he remounted the new core in the dispeller case, made a few more minor alterations, and slowly withdrew a tapered controller a fraction of an inch in length. Then he took a large ballpeen hammer and struck directly toward the box. It stopped, literally in mid-air, and bounced back as though it had been pounded on a ball of rubber.

Eldo smiled, and stroked the *basik's* back again. This was his answer to all the ruthlessly ambitious plans of Kursh of Tarr: a matter repeller of undreamed-of power.

It needed only to be duplicated on a much larger scale, and his triumph would be assured. No, there was one thing more. He needed a thin, but strong film of—of what? The answer came as he continued to stroke the *basik*:

Anti-force. He struck at the box again, and carefully measured the distance from the stopped hammer at its core to its much wider perimeter.

He withdrew the controller another fraction of an inch and tested again. The wall of anti-force moved out three feet, then six, then twelve. He continued to experiment, using a radio to move the controller. He was unable to get past the anti-force himself, but quickly discovered that invisible waves of non-matter could surmount that obstacle without difficulty.

Eldo instantly calculated that even in its experimental small size the anti-force would erect an impenetrable sphere a full mile in diameter. Exultantly he caused the controller to be pushed home, effectively neutralizing the machine, and went to work again with pencil and paper to design a repeller capable of enveloping the entire planet of Likk with a sphere of force fifty miles above the ground.

When Eldo finished the big machine, some eighteen hours later, he was tired, and the *basik* was hungry. Eldo had stopped neither to rest nor to eat, and although it was unlike him to forget the *basik* even while fiercely preoccupied, who within reason could blame him now?

Eldo grasped the controlling rod and pulled it gently toward the designated stop point. As he did so the *basik*, impatient at last,

leaped to his shoulder. Eldo flinched, and the controller came cleanly and *completely* out of the repeller.

He froze, horrified. He saw the loose objects in the room sway and tumble as the anti-force swept through and past them—so swiftly that they remained unharmed. But he knew that once the wave stopped moving, neither speed nor force nor mass could find a way through the tight-meshed particles in their frozen upward spiral.

And with no controller—Eldo sighed. What did it matter? The sphere should expand until it encircled the planet to a height of fifty miles, and stop. The accident simply meant there was now no way to neutralize the anti-force. The core had closed itself over the hole into which the controller had originally been inserted. With the rod fully withdrawn, the elements and nuclei inside had immediately sealed over the opening.

Eldo knew that Eldurium had an extremely long half-life. There would be a time interval of a hundred and twenty years, three days, four minutes and fifty-eight seconds—measured from the time the *basik* had jumped upon his arm—before the repeller would consume enough of itself to reduce below critical mass, and the anti-force would cease to exist.

Very well, he thought. So be it. He got the starving *basik* a pan of strained *outra* and watched the beast gobble it down. Then Eldo

Lite stretched out on a cot in his laboratory and slept. Incredibly, for the first time in his life, he slept brain and all.

A THOUSAND miles from the planet Likk a warship of Tarr hurtled silently through the black night of space with an eager fourth lieutenant in the commander's chair. Behind the warship a convoy of bulky freighters maintained a steady pace, each ship's presence accounted for by glowing lights on the battle cruiser's locator panel.

Everything was in order and the future seemed bright indeed to the lieutenant in command. Not many young men only six months out of Leaders Academy could look back on two promotions scarcely a fortnight apart. Briskly he gave orders to reverse ship, set the stern rockets to half blast and commence the long descent toward Likk.

The advance communication party had radioed that complete preparation had been made for the arrival of the main supply party, and that no resistance from any source was anticipated.

The young officer glanced at the deceleration dial. It showed a normal curve. But even as he stared the back of his chair began to press harder against him. He stirred in consternation, unable to believe that in less than five seconds the dial hand had fallen sharply. Deceleration was ten times normal, and he couldn't move. What could it mean? All

other instruments were functioning normally. There were no other malfunctions anywhere in the control room. Could the ship be running, rear-on, into an obstacle?

The vessel began to shudder. The deceleration pointer spun the rest of the way around and came to a dead stop. The ship seemed bent on mushing for a moment and then, still under the force of Half Blast, stern, took off in the opposite direction.

Now the acceleration dial came abruptly to life, and the lieutenant recovered his wits.

"Cut rockets," he said calmly into his phone. "Forward rockets—full blast to halt. Radioman, order space freighters to change their course one hundred and eighty degrees and orbit until you receive further orders."

The ship was running smoothly again, drifting to a stop.

"Open rear vision plates," the lieutenant commanded.

He stepped quickly to the port and stared out. Likk was just becoming visible far below, a red-orange disk faintly aureoled in light.

"One-eighth blast on forward tubes," he ordered, and slowly the ship started backwards, nosing down again towards the tiny planet.

Again it mushed, but more gently this time under the lesser momentum. Then suddenly, and despite the force of the forward

rockets, it reversed its direction, and picked up speed.

The lieutenant realized he was up against something the Academy had forgotten to teach him. There was absolutely no visible impediment beneath the rocket. But something *had* to be there, some obstacle the ship couldn't get past!

He ordered the ship into an orbit which would circle Likk. Instruments showed him now to be seventy-five miles above the surface. He nosed down slowly: 70 miles, 65 . . . 60 . . . 55 . . . and it happened again. The ship leveled off involuntarily, bounced upward and, off orbit now, started out into space in a wide ellipse.

Quickly he corrected course and tried the maneuver again. The results were just as incomprehensible.

"Radioman," he said, still calm of voice, as his training had taught him to be. "Contact the advance commander on Likk."

He got the commander on the phone, told him what had happened.

"See if it's anything controlled from down there," he ordered.

An hour later the radio signaled back.

"There's an ancient colonist down here," the commander said. "He seems to be obsessed with his own importance. He's rigged up a device he calls anti-force. He boasts that you can't penetrate it."

"Well, by Tarr," snapped the lieutenant. "Can you get control of it, and turn it off?"

"We have control of it," the commander replied. "But there's no way to turn it off. It's broken. The old gent says it'll turn itself off—in about a hundred and twenty years."

The lieutenant turned pale. "Who's he kidding?" he yelled, forgetting his lessons in calm. The crew looked at him, startled.

Another voice came through.

"Yes, gentlemen," it said, deep and vibrant but definitely permeated with an air of relaxed enjoyment. "This is Eldo Lite, at your service."

There was dead silence in the control room.

Fourth Lieutenant Eldo Lite, III, sat immobile in front of the radio staring at nothing; his eyes wide with shock.

There was good stuff in Eldo Lite the Third. He did not cry out, "Grandfather! This is little Eldo. Let me through!"

For that matter, Eldo III had never seen his great-grandfather, and had hardly even heard of him, if the truth must be told, except in study at the Academy.

There the name of Eldo Lite, Senior, was still revered despite the old man's scandalous behavior of twenty years before.

Still, there's something about family that gets a man. Also, there's something about living to a hale and hearty ninety-six that inspires respect and awe. So Eldo knew a few moments of shocked surprise after he heard the voice

on the radio. To his everlasting credit, he did not reveal his identity even when he was once more in command of himself.

"Sir," he said. "This is the Commander of the Warship *Lauren Sea*, of the Space Navy of Kursh of Tarr. I order you to allow us to land."

Old Eldo chuckled. How long had it been since he'd heard a young voice speaking in that manner? He almost wished he hadn't been so impulsive in building the repeller, or at the very least, that the *basik* hadn't jumped on him. He sighed.

"Alas, my young friend," he said. "Even if I wished to, I could not. Tell your Kursh of Tarr he'll have to find another supply base."

"Sir," repeated young Eldo, more firmly this time. "It is my duty to warn you. Since the planet of Likk has never been officially claimed by the Universe of Tarr, your actions place you in the category of an enemy. If you persist, I shall be forced to report to my superiors and request permission to open war against you. I shall not hesitate once the order comes through."

Eldo, Sr., did not need to be told how fully prepared the ship was for war. He had conceived her basic design himself nearly fifty years before. The vessel carried three interplanetary missiles of 10-A power, each one powerful enough to disintegrate a world twice the size of Likk. In addition,

its arsenal included five space-to-ground missiles of 3-A power, and a full hundred ship-to-ship shells of 1/2-A each.

"Your power will do you no good," he said. "All the power in Kursh's universe cannot blast open my anti-force field. But if you use it, it can—and probably will—bounce back and travel through space until it strikes something solid. Do you want to be responsible for that?"

Young Eldo considered. It sounded impossible—an anti-force field that couldn't be breached. The old man was brilliant—even a genius. But he must be bluffing.

He broke off contact abruptly, retreated with his warship to a point one hundred miles from Likk, and established communication with Bullo Alman, Master General of the Spaceways, and the very brilliant new supply commander for Kursh's war of conquest.

Alman took the information through channels until it reached Kursh himself. As might have been expected, the consternation in Universe Headquarters was considerable at the intelligence that old Eldo Lite was still alive and still a problem. But in a few moments word went winging back to young Eldo authorizing him to declare war on Likk and take whatever action he deemed desirable, including a call for armed help if necessary.

Young Eldo prepared an elaborate

orate and very determined course of action before he got his advance commander on the radio.

Full Lieutenant Arma Kak liked old Eldo Lite, despite the trouble he was causing. When he relayed the warship commander's ultimatum the old man just grunted. But Kak thought he saw a sad, compassionate look in his unblinking gray eyes.

"Sir," Kak said, "I'll try again to explain to the lieutenant exactly what he's up against. Somehow I don't think you're bluffing. I guess having your blood in him is making Lieutenant Lite sort of—well—" Kak floundered. He had started to say bull-headed, but thought better of it.

Old Lite jumped to his feet. "Did you say Lite—Lieutenant Eldo Lite?"

"Why, yes," said Kak.

Eldo resumed his seat. Eldo... that would be Eldo Lite III, then. No punishment was too dire for parents who refused to give their children individual names. He had named his son Kory, but Kory had deliberately turned around and named his first boy Eldo II. Now there was an Eldo the Third. Maybe he should let the young fool blow himself up, and wipe out the line. Blundering idiots!

He looked up, startled. What in all conscience could be done about it? The kid had stubborn Lite blood in his veins—though probably not a full cargo of Lite brains. But it was too late—tragically too

late—to do anything about that now.

"Kak," he said, "you say that Lieutenant Lite has given me until seventeen-thirty to turn off the anti-force field?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then he's going to blast it?"

"That's right, sir. With every weapon on his ship. He says he prefers to warn you in advance. He intends to locate your repeller, and focus his missiles on a point of the anti-force directly above it."

Eldo inclined his head in bitter resignation.

"And his ship is carrying ninety-five A's of power. By Tarr! There's enough potential in that to blow up half the universe if it's exploded all at once. It probably won't penetrate the anti-force shell. But if it does, there won't be enough left of Likk to—" He shuddered.

He looked at Kak's wrist clock. He had no watch of his own, because no one on Likk had worried about keeping track of time for years.

"Seventeen-thirty. Why, that's only fifty minutes from now. The boy is a fast worker."

"Yes, sir, said Kak. What else *could* he say?"

"Go away now," said Eldo. "But keep me informed. I want to think. Confound it, I'm not a malicious old man. I'm responsible for that lad, in a way, and I've got to at least try to save him from himself."

Kak retired to his temporary headquarters, his lips set in tight lines. He tried again, with all the persuasiveness at his command, to get young Eldo to change his mind. But the youngster was adamant. He explained that he was backing off two hundred miles and at the proper time would release his missiles as rapidly as possible—all of them timed to reach and explode simultaneously at the designated point, and at exactly 1830 hours, Tarr Standard Time.

Eldo Lite, feeling old now for the first time in his ninety-six years, wished desperately for an instant that he had a clock. Then he was glad that he didn't possess one. He was reasonably sure that not even ninety-five A's of power would crack the anti-force field. But it would certainly demolish anything in its path as it fled back through space.

He perked up finally, from a lifetime's force of habit and began to juggle the intangibles in his mind. There was another way to neutralize the anti-force—a quite simple way. *Destroy the repeller.*

It could be destroyed if a micrograin of Eldurium could be fired into it, overbalancing its present state of relatively stable instability. It would explode, and the anti-force would collapse.

But—if the field exploded would anything be left of Likk? He began making rapid calculations on a pad at his elbow. If

young Eldo—stupid young pup—exploded all his power at a strategic point a terrific dent would be made in the field before the charge was deflected back into space.

Now, suppose the repeller were to be exploded at that precise instant? And suppose further that the two blasts, working together from opposite sides of the weakened point in the anti-force shell, succeeded in cracking it an instant before it collapsed beneath the disruptive impact of its own explosion?

Yes, that would do it! The force of the repeller explosion, seeking the path of least resistance, would funnel straight upwards toward the weak point. It would do so because at the fragile moment all the rest of the anti-force sphere would still be intact. The repeller, sweeping up, would gather young Eldo's 95-A blast with it, and the two blasts would dwindle and vanish in space, for at the critical time the anti-force's bounce would cease to exist. The combined forces would not carom off into the void to become an interstellar monsoon of dreadful and unguessed terror.

Hurriedly Eldo went to Kak's quarters.

"There's no time to explain," he said. "Evacuate everybody to at least five miles from my laboratory—beyond that range of low hills. Make sure the distance is considerable. What time is it?"

"Seventeen-ten," Kak said.

"Can you do it?"

"With luck," Kak replied, and ran out shouting orders.

Eldo went back to his laboratory. He set up the micro-cannon, aimed it at the core of the repeller, and connected it to a portable transceiver. Then he rushed out, sweeping up the *basik* in one arm, and jumped aboard Kak's airseid just as it was getting under way.

They waited behind the shelter of a low volcanic hummock, out of which issued wisps of fog and vapor. The vapor cloud enveloped them completely, for they were no longer protected from that obscuring blight by the community of fogless bubbles created by the molecular dispersers.

Nervously Eldo watched Kak's clock hand sweep around: Seventeen twenty-five — six — seven — The seconds fled as he fingered lightly the key on the radio signaller.

At precisely 1730 he pressed the key.

Fourth Lieutenant Eldo Lite III tightened his lips, his face drained of all color. The last missile had left the warship and he was convinced that in a few seconds it would all be over—one way or another. Either the anti-force field would be broken, and he would be safely on his way to Likk or—the explosion would fail and he would be on his way out of the service, disgraced, broken, with

the future a nightmare of uncertainty.

Then it came.

The missiles reached their target, gathered together by their intricate, interior mechanisms. They exploded in a fury of incandescent light and flashings such as young Eldo had never dreamed could be created in the dark immensity of space.

The smoke boiled and roiled and plummeted above the planet of Likk, and shock waves made blurs across the vision plate. Almost he regretted that there was no air between Likk and the ship to carry the sound to him.

Then out of the billowing mass of clouds a long, thick black column of fire and smoke arose, and shot up like a huge log. It climbed and climbed, high above Likk's atmosphere and out into space, traveling on and on . . .

After half an hour Eldo impatiently ordered the warship forward. The freighters were still orbiting a few hundred miles out, awaiting further orders. General Alman was probably getting impatient for news.

The warship nosed downward, passing the fifty-mile point with no resistance. He had succeeded, Eldo thought—the anti-force shell was gone. His triumph should teach that old goat a lesson . . .

Likk's fog was tossing and tumbling uneasily in the aftermath of the blast. But the rocket didn't need human eyes. It settled, slowly,

and a slight jar made its crew aware that the ground had been reached . . .

The old man doesn't look so tough, thought young Eldo. They faced each other at the edge of the former laboratory site. Nothing remained of that imposing edifice now but a tremendous hole—and a very curious phenomenon.

Straight upward it spiraled, a great round tunnel of nothingness resembling a child's-nightmare conception of a giant pipe thrusting to the sky. Fog swirled to its edges and all around it, but there was no smoke in the tunnel itself. Neither was there any mist.

"That's where the anti-force and my molecular displacers went when your blast broke through and shocked the repeller," Eldo Lite, Sr., said meekly. *Darned young pup*, he thought. *Standing there with that smug look on his face, thinking he's done something tremendous. Well, let him think so* . . .

Kak looked at old Eldo knowingly, but remained silent. The old man must have a great deal of bluff in his nature after all, he told himself. But why doesn't he

inform the lieutenant that if it hadn't been for his great-grand-daddy . . .

A messenger came from the radio room of the warship. He handed a written message to Lieutenant Lite, who swiftly glanced at it and passed it to Kak.

"Congratulations on successful conclusion of war with planet of Likk," Kak read. He shook his head. Lite had requested permission to fire on Likk at 1600 hours. At 1730 the battle was over. Maybe the only ninety-minute war in history, he thought.

Eldo Lite, Sr., coughed.

Now, he thought, *I guess my solitude is over for good. Perhaps it's just as well. This boy of mine has some excellent stuff in him, if anyone will take the trouble to bring it out. Too much of me in him, maybe. The way he went blundering into this thing, taking no advice* . . .

He coughed again, and hugged the shivering *basik* close.

"By Tarr, Eldo," he said, "you went and busted up all my displacers and the fog's back in again. Got any raincoats aboard that fancy warship of yours?"

sole solution

by . . . Eric Frank Russell

**He was the boldest of dreamers
imprisoned in a world which only
a majestic vision could change.**

HE BROODED in darkness and there was no-one else. Not a voice, not a whisper. Not the touch of a hand. Not the warmth of another heart.

Darkness.

Solitude.

Eternal confinement where all was black and silent and nothing stirred. Imprisonment without prior condemnation. Punishment without sin. The unbearable that had to be borne unless some mode of escape could be devised.

No hope of rescue from elsewhere. No sorrow or sympathy or pity in another soul, another mind. No doors to be opened, no locks to be turned, no bars to be sawn apart. Only the thick, deep sable night in which to fumble and find nothing.

Circle a hand to the right and there is nought. Sweep an arm to the left and discover emptiness utter and complete. Walk forward through the darkness like a blind man lost in a vast, forgotten hall and there is no floor, no echo of footsteps, nothing to bar one's path.

He could touch and sense one thing only. And that was self.

Eric Frank Russell is a scholarly-looking, energetic and encyclopaedically-informed Englishman who enjoys midnight discussions and can more than hold his own in the liveliest controversies without seeming to exert himself at all. He lives in Liverpool, and during World War II he served in an R. A. F. unit in the Normandy Invasion. In this tiny fantasy he has touched with extraordinary perceptiveness on a problem awesome in its implications.

Therefore the only available resources with which to overcome his predicament were those secreted within himself. He must be the instrument of his own salvation.

How?

No problem is beyond solution. By that thesis science lives. Without it, science dies. He was the ultimate scientist. As such, he could not refuse this challenge to his capabilities.

His torments were those of boredom, loneliness, mental and physical sterility. They were not to be endured. The easiest escape is via the imagination. One hangs in a strait-jacket and flees the corporeal trap by adventuring in a dreamland of one's own.

But dreams are not enough. They are unreal and all too brief. The freedom to be gained must be genuine and of long duration. That meant he must make a stern reality of dreams, a reality so contrived that it would persist for all time. It must be self-perpetuating. Nothing less would make escape complete.

So he sat in the great dark and battled the problem. There was no clock, no calendar to mark the length of thought. There was no external data upon which to compute. There was nothing, nothing except the workings within his agile mind.

And one thesis: no problem is beyond solution.

He found it eventually. It meant escape from everlasting night. It would provide experience; compan-

ionship, adventure, mental exercise, entertainment, warmth, love, the sound of voices, the touch of hands.

The plan was anything but rudimentary. On the contrary it was complicated enough to defy untangling for endless eons. It had to be like that to have permanence. The unwanted alternative was swift return to drear silence and the bitter dark.

It took a deal of working out. A million and one aspects had to be considered along with all their diverse effects upon each other. And when that was done he had to cope with the next million. And so on . . . on . . . on.

He created a mighty dream of his own, a place of infinite complexity schemed in every detail to the last dot and comma. Within this he would live anew. But not as himself. He was going to dissipate his person into numberless parts, a great multitude of variegated shapes and forms each of which would have to battle its own peculiar environment.

And he would toughen the struggle to the limit of endurance by unthinking himself, handicapping his parts with appalling ignorance and forcing them to learn afresh. He would seed enmity between them by dictating the basic rules of the game. Those who observed the rules would be called good. Those who did not would be called bad. Thus there would be endless delaying conflicts within the one great conflict.

When all was ready and prepared he intended to disrupt and become no longer one, but an enormous concourse of entities. Then his parts must fight back to unity and himself.

But first he must make reality of

the dream. Ah, that was the test!

The time was now. The experiment must begin.

Leaning forward, *he* gazed into the dark and said, "Let there be light."

And there was light.

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FU 64

the
blood-
stained
god

by . . . Robert E. Howard
and L. Sprague de Camp

In a city of thieves the golden
god was a dark enigma—until
Conan's sword flamed mightily.

IT WAS AS dark as the barren heart of midnight in that ominously deserted alley down which Conan of Cimmeria groped on a quest as blind as the darkness around him. Had there been anyone to witness, they would have seen a tall and enormously powerful man clad in a flowing Zuagir khilat beneath a mailshirt of fine steel mesh, and wearing about his shoulders a Zuagir cloak of camel's hair. His mane of black hair and his broad somber face, bronzed by the desert sun, were hidden by the Zuagir kaffiyeh.

A sharp, pain-edged cry halted him in his tracks.

Such cries were not uncommon in the twisting alleys of Arenjun, the City of Thieves, and no cautious or timid man would think of interfering in an affair that was none of his business. But Conan was neither cautious nor timid. His ever-lively curiosity would not let him pass by a cry for help, and besides, he was searching for certain men, and the disturbance might be a clue to their whereabouts.

If by some tragic mischance you were waylaid and robbed in the deserts of Nis and had to spend many weary hours seeking the right road to Bagdad—if, in brief, you missed the first two stories in this newest, golden-letter series of Conan the Barbarian sagas you are bidden now to mount and triumph. For the steeds of fantasy are chafing at the bit and eager to be off. And what better guides could you have in your Cimmerian-bright journeyings than the indefatigable, ever sprightly L. Sprague de Camp and the late great Robert E. Howard?

Obeying his quick barbarian instincts, he turned toward a beam of light which lanced the darkness directly ahead and brightened the stones for several feet on both sides of the alley. An instant later he was peering through a crack in the close-drawn shutters of a window in a thick wall.

He was looking into a spacious room hung with velvet tapestries and littered with costly rugs and couches. About the largest of the couches a group of men clustered—seven brawny Zamoran braves, and two more who eluded identification. In their midst, his head slightly elevated, another man was stretched out—a Kezankian tribesman naked to the waist.

Although he was a powerful man, a ruffian as muscular as himself gripped each wrist and ankle. Between the four of them they had him spread-eagled on the couch, unable to move, though the muscles stood out in quivering knots on his limbs and shoulders. His eyes gleamed redly and his broad chest glistened with sweat. As Conan looked, a supple man in a turban of red silk lifted a glowing coal from a smoking brazier with a pair of tongs and poised it over the prone Kezankian's quivering breast, already scarred from similar torture.

Another man, taller than the one with the red turban, snarled a question Conan could not understand. The Kezankian shook his head violently and spat in savage defiance. The red-hot coal dropped

full on the hairy breast, wrenching an inhuman shriek from the sufferer. In that instant Conan launched his full weight against the shutters.

The Cimmerian's action was not so impulsive as it looked. For his present purposes he needed a friend among the hillmen of the Kezankian range, a people notoriously hostile to all strangers. And here was a chance to get one. The shutters splintered inward with a crash, and he hit the floor inside feet first, scimitar in one hand and Zuagir sword-knife in the other. The torturers whirled and cried out in astonishment.

They saw a tall massive figure clad in the garments of a Zuagir, with a fold of his flowing kaffiyeh drawn about his face. Over his mask his eyes blazed a volcanic blue. For an instant the scene held, like a frozen tableau. Then it melted into ferocious action.

The man in the red turban called out sharply and a hairy giant lunged to meet the oncoming intruder. The Zamoran held a three-foot sword low, and as he charged he ripped viciously upward. But the down-lashing scimitar met and parried the rising wrist. The hand, still gripping the knife, flew from that wrist in a shower of blood, and the long narrow blade in Conan's left hand sliced through the man's throat, silencing his enraged outcry.

Over the crumpling corpse the Cimmerian leaped at Red Turban and his tall companion. Red Turban drew a knife, the tall man a saber.

"Cut him down, Jillad!" cried Red Turban, retreating before the Cimmerian's impetuous onslaught. "Zal, help here!"

The man called Jillad parried Conan's slash and cut back. Conan avoided the swipe with a shift that would have shamed the leap of a starving panther, and the same movement brought him within reach of Red Turban's knife.

The knife shot out. The point struck Conan's side, but failed to pierce the shirt of black ring-mail. Red Turban leaped back, so narrowly avoiding Conan's knife that the lean blade slit his silken vest and the skin beneath. He tripped over a stool and fell sprawling. But before Conan could follow up his advantage, Jillad was pressing him, raining fierce blows with his saber.

As he parried, the Cimmerian saw that the man called Zal was advancing with a heavy poleax, while Red Turban was scrambling to his feet.

Conan did not wait to be surrounded. A swipe of his scimitar drove Jillad back on his heels. Then, as Zal raised the poleax, Conan darted in under the blow, and the next instant Zal was down, writhing in his own blood.

Conan leaped for the men who still gripped the prisoner. They let go of the Kezankian, shouting and drawing their tulwars. One struck at the hillman, who evaded the blow by rolling off the bench. Then Conan was in the middle, protecting the Kezankian. He retreated

before a torrent of blows, his voice rising as he shouted to the Kezankian: "Get out! Ahead of me! Quickly!"

"Dogs!" screamed Red Turban. "Don't let them escape!"

"Come and taste of death yourself!" Conan laughed wildly, speaking Zamoran with a barbarous accent.

The Kezankian, weak from torture, slid back a bolt and threw open a door opening upon a small court. He stumbled across its flagstones waveringly while behind him Conan faced his tormentors in the doorway.

In the confined space their very numbers hindered them. He laughed and cursed them as he parried and thrust. Red Turban was dancing behind the others, screaming curses.

Conan's scimitar licked out like the tongue of a cobra and a Zamoran shrieked and fell, clutching his belly. Jillad, lunging, tripped over him and fell also. Before the cursing, squirming figures jamming the doorway could untangle themselves, Conan turned and ran across the yard toward a wall over which the Kezankian had already disappeared.

Sheathing his weapons, Conan leaped and caught the coping, swung himself up and had one glimpse of the black, winding street outside. Then something smashed against his head, and limply he toppled from the wall into the shadowy street below . . .

The tiny glow of a taper in his face roused Conan. He sat up, blinking and cursing, and groped for his sword. Then the light was blown out and a voice spoke in the darkness:

"Be at ease, Conan of Cimmeria. I am your friend."

"Who in Crom's name are you?" demanded Conan.

He had found his scimitar on the ground nearby, and he stealthily gathered his legs under him for a spring. He was in the street at the foot of the wall from which he had fallen, and the other man was no more than a dim bulk looming over him in the shadowy starlight.

"Your friend," repeated the other in a soft Iranistanian accent. "You may call me Shashan."

Conan rose, scimitar in hand. The Iranistani extended something toward him. Conan caught the glint of steel in the starlight. But before he could strike he saw that it was his own knife which the other was presenting to him, hilt first.

"You're as suspicious as a starving wolf," Conan," laughed Shashan. "But save your steel for your enemies."

"Where are they?" Conan asked hoarsely, taking the knife but keeping it unsheathed.

"Gone. Into the mountains, on the trail of the blood-stained god."

Conan started and caught Shashan's khilat in an iron grip. He glared into the man's dark eyes, mocking and mysterious in the starlight.

"Damn you, what do you know of the blood-stained god?" Conan's knife touched the Iranistani's side below his ribs.

"I know this," said Shashan. "You came to Arenjun following thieves who stole from you the map of a treasure greater than Yildiz's hoard. I too came seeking something. I was hiding nearby, watching through a hole in the wall, when you burst into the room where the Kezankian was being tortured. How did you know it was they who stole your map?"

"I didn't," muttered Conan. "I heard a man cry out, and thought it a good idea to interfere. If I had known they were the men I sought. . . . How much do *you* know?"

"This much: Hidden in the mountains near here is an ancient temple which the hill-folk fear to enter. It is said to go back to Pre-Cataclysmic times, though the scholars disagree as to whether it is Grondarian or was built by the unknown pre-human race who ruled the Hyrkanians just after the Cataclysm.

"The Kezankians forbid the region to all outsiders. But a Nemedian named Ostorio did find the temple. He entered it and discovered a golden idol encrusted with red jewels, which he called the blood-stained god. He could not bring it away with him, as it was bigger than a man. But he made a map, intending to return. Although he got safely away, he was stabbed by some ruffian in Shadizar

and died there. Before he died he gave the map to you, Conan."

"Well?" demanded Conan grimly. The house behind him was dark now—and ominously still.

"The map was stolen," said Shashan. "Do you know by whom?"

"I didn't know at the time," growled Conan. "Later I learned the thieves were Zyras, a Corinthian, and Arshik, a disinherited Turanian prince. Some skulking servant spied on Ostorio as he lay dying and told them. Though I knew neither man by sight, I traced them to this city. Tonight I learned that they were hiding in this alley. I was blundering about looking for a clue when I stumbled into that brawl."

"You fought them in ignorance!" said Shashan. "The Kezankian was Rostum, a spy of the Kezankian chieftain Keraspa. They lured him into their house and were singeing him to make him talk freely about the secret trails through the mountains. You know the rest."

"All except what happened when I climbed the wall."

"Somebody threw a stool at you and hit your head. When you fell outside the wall they paid you no further attention, either thinking you dead or not recognizing you in your mask. They chased the Kezankian, but whether they caught him I do not know. Soon they returned, saddled up, and rode like madmen westward, leaving the dead where they fell. I came to see who you were and recognized you instantly."

"Then the man in the red turban was Arshik," muttered Conan. "But where was Zyras?"

"Disguised as a Turanian—the man they called Jillad."

"Oh. Well then?" growled Conan.

"Like you I want the red god, even though of all the men who have sought it down the centuries only Ostorio escaped with his life. There is supposed to be some mysterious curse on would-be plunderers—"

"What do you know of that?" asked Conan sharply.

Shashan shrugged. "Nothing much. The folk of Kezankia speak of a cruel retribution which the god inflicts on those who raise covetous hands against him. But I'm no superstitious fool. You're not afraid, are you?"

"Of course not!" As a matter of fact Conan was. Though he feared no man or beast, the supernatural filled his barbarian's mind with atavistic terrors. Still, he did not care to admit the fact. "What have you in mind?" he asked.

"Why, only that neither of us can fight Zyras' whole band alone. But together we can follow them and take the idol from them. What do you say?"

"All right, I'll do it. But I'll kill you like a dog if you try any tricks!"

Shashan laughed. "I know you would, so you can trust me. Come. I have horses waiting."

The Iranistani led the way through twisting streets overhung

with latticed balconies and along deserted alleys until he stopped at the lamp-lit door of a courtyard. At his knock a bearded face appeared at the wicket. After some muttered words the gate opened and Shashan strode in, Conan following suspiciously. But the horses were there, and a word from the keeper of the serai set sleepy servants to saddling them and filling saddle-pouches with food.

Soon Conan and Shashan were riding together out of the west gate, perfunctorily challenged by the sleepy guard. Shashan was portly but muscular, with a broad, shrewd face and dark, alert eyes. He bore a horseman's lance over his shoulder and handled his weapons with the expertness of long practice. Conan did not doubt that in a pinch he would fight with cunning and courage.

Conan also did not doubt that he could trust Shashan to play fair just so long as the alliance was to his advantage, and to murder his partner at the first opportunity when it became expedient to do so in order to keep all the treasure himself.

Dawn found them riding through the rugged defiles of the bare, brown, rocky Kezankian Mountains, separating the easternmost marches of Koth and Zamora from the Turanian steppes. Though both Koth and Zamora claimed the region, neither had been able to subdue it, and the town of Arenjun, perched on a steep-sided hill, had

successfully withstood two sieges by the Turanian hordes from the East. The road branched and became fainter until Shashan confessed himself at a loss to know where they were.

"I'm still following their tracks," grunted Conan. "If you cannot see them, I can."

Hours passed, and signs of the recent passage of horses became clear. Conan said: "We're closing on them, and they still outnumber us. Let us stay out of sight until they get the idol. Then we'll ambush them and take it from them."

Shashan's eyes gleamed. "Good! But let's be wary. This is the country of Keraspa, who robs all he catches."

Mid-afternoon found them still following the trace of an ancient forgotten road. As they rode toward a narrow gorge, Shashan said: "If that Kezankian got back to Keraspa, the Kezankians will be alert for strangers . . ."

They reined up as a lean, hawk-faced Kezankian rode out of the gorge with his hand upraised. "Halt!" he cried. "By what leave do you ride in the land of Keraspa?"

"Careful," cautioned Conan. "They may be all around us."

"Keraspa claims toll on travelers," answered Shashan under his breath. "Maybe a few coins is all this fellow wants." Fumbling in his girdle, he said to the tribesman: "We are but poor travelers, glad

to pay your brave chief's toll. We ride alone."

"Then who is that who rides behind you?" demanded the Kezankian, nodding his head in the direction from which they had come. "Death perchance?"

Shashan half turned his head. Instantly the Kezankian whipped a dagger from his girdle and struck at the Iranistani.

Quick as he was, Conan was quicker. As the dagger darted at Shashan's throat, Conan's scimitar flashed and steel rang. The dagger whirled away, and with a curse the Kezankian caught at his sword. Before he could pull the blade free, Conan struck again, cleaving turban and skull. The Kezankian's horse neighed and reared, throwing the corpse headlong. Conan wrenched his own horse around.

"Ride for the gorge!" he yelled. "It's an ambush!"

As the Kezankian tumbled to earth, there came the flat snap of bows and the whistle of arrows. Shashan's horse leaped wildly as an arrow struck it in the neck and bolted for the mouth of the defile. Conan felt an arrow tug at his sleeve as he struck in the spurs and fled after Shashan, who was unable to control his beast.

As they swept toward the mouth of the gorge, three horsemen rode out swinging broad-bladed tulwars. Shashan, abandoning his effort to check his maddened mount, drove his lance at the nearest. The spear

transfixed the man and hurled him out of the saddle.

The next instant Conan had overtaken a second swordsman, who swung the heavy tulwar. The Cimmerian threw up his scimitar and the blades met with a crash as the horses came together breast to breast.

Conan, rising in his stirrups, smote downward with all his immense strength, beating down the tulwar and splitting the skull of the wielder. Then he was galloping up the gorge with arrows screeching past him. Shashan's wounded horse stumbled and went down; the Iranistani leaped clear as it fell.

Conan pulled up, shouting: "Get up behind me!"

Shashan, lance in hand, leaped up behind the saddle. A touch of the spurs and the heavily-burdened horse set off down the gorge. Yells behind showed that the tribesmen were scampering to their hidden horses. A turn in the gorge muffled the noises.

"That Kezankian spy must have gotten back to Keraspa," exclaimed Shashan breathlessly. "They want blood, not gold. Do you suppose they have wiped out Zyras?"

"He might have passed before they set up their ambush, or they might have been following him when they turned to trap us. I think he's still ahead of us."

A mile farther on they heard faint sounds of pursuit. Then they came out into a natural bowl walled by sheer cliffs. From the midst of

this indentation a slope led up to a bottleneck pass on the other side. As they neared the pass, Conan saw that a low stone wall almost bisected it.

Shashan yelled and jumped down from the horse as a flight of arrows screeched past. One struck the horse in the chest.

The beast lurched to a thundering fall, and Conan jumped clear and rolled behind a cluster of rocks, where Shashan had already taken cover. More arrows splintered against boulders or lodged quivering in the earth. The two adventurers looked at each other with sardonic humor.

"We've found Zyras!" said Shashan.

"In an instant," laughed Conan, "they'll rush us. Keraspa will come up behind us to close the trap."

"Let them come!" cried Shashan.

A taunting voice shouted: "Come out and get shot, dogs! Who's the Zuagir with you, Shashan? I thought I had brained him last night!"

"My name is Conan," roared the Cimmerian.

After a moment of silence, Zyras shouted: "I might have known! Well, we have you now!"

"You're in the same fix!" yelled Conan. "You heard the fighting back down the gorge?"

"Yes, we heard it when we stopped to water the horses. Who's chasing you?"

"Keraspa and a hundred Kezan-

think he'll let you go—after you tortured one of his men?"

"You had better let us join you," added Shashan.

"Is that the truth?" yelled Zyras, his turbaned head appearing over the wall.

"Are you deaf, man?" retorted Conan.

The gorge reverberated with yells and hoof-beats.

"Get in, quickly!" shouted Zyras. "Time enough to divide the idol if we get out of this alive."

Conan and Shashan leaped up and ran up the slope to the wall, where hairy arms helped them over. Conan looked at his new allies: Zyras, grim and hard-eyed in his Turanian guise; Arshik, still dapper after leagues of riding; and three swarthy Zamorans who bared their teeth in greeting. Zyras and Arshik each wore a shirt of chain-mail like those of Conan and Shashan, and brandished long spears.

The Kezankians, about a score of them, reined up as the bows of the Zamorans and Arshik sent arrows swishing among them. Some of them shot back; others whirled and rode furiously out of range to dismount, as the wall was too high to be carried by a mounted charge. One saddle was emptied and one wounded horse bolted back down the gorge with its rider.

"They must have been following us," exclaimed Zyras. "Conan, you lied! That is no hundred men!"

"Enough to cut our throats," said Conan, trying his sword. "And

Keraspa can send for reinforcements whenever he likes."

Zyras growled: "We have a chance behind this wall. I believe it was built by the same race that built the red god's temple. Save your arrows for the rush."

Covered by a continuous fire of arrows from four of their number on the flanks, the rest of the Kezankians ran up the slope in a solid mass, those in front holding up light bucklers. Behind them Conan saw Keraspa's red beard as the wily chief urged his men on.

"Shoot!" screamed Zyras. Arrows plunged into the mass of men and three writhing figures were left behind on the slope. But the rest came on, eyes glaring and blades glittering in hairy fists.

The defenders shot their last arrows into the mass and then rose up behind the wall, drawing steel. The mountaineers rolled up against the wall. Some tried to boost their fellows up to the top, while others pushed small boulders against the foot of the wall to provide steps. Along the barrier sounded the shattering impact of bone-breaking blows, the rasp and slither of steel, the gasping oaths of dying men.

Conan stoutly repulsed three Kezankians, and beside him saw Shashan thrust his spear into the open mouth of another until the point came out the back of the man's neck. A wild-eyed tribesman stabbed a long knife into the belly of one of the Zamorans. Into the gap left by the falling body the

howling Kezankian lunged, hurling himself up and over the wall before Conan could stop him. The giant Cimmerian took a cut on his left arm and crushed in the man's shoulder with a return blow.

Leaping over the body, he hewed into the men swarming up over the wall with no time to see how the fight was going on either side. Zyras was cursing in Corinthian and Arshik in Hyrkanian. Somebody screamed in mortal agony. A tribesman got a pair of gorilla-like hands on Conan's thick neck, but the Cimmerian tensed his neck-muscles and stabbed low with his knife. Again and again he stabbed until with a moan the Kezankian released him and toppled from the wall.

Gasping for air, Conan looked about him, realizing that the pressure had slackened. The few remaining Kezankians were staggering down the slope, most of them grievously wounded. The dead lay piled deep at the foot of the wall. All three of the Zamorans were dead or dying, and Conan saw Arshik sitting with his back against the wall, his hands pressed to his body in silent agony. The prince's lips were blue, but he achieved a ghastly smile.

"Born in a palace," he whispered, "and dying behind a rock wall! No matter—it is fate. There is a curse on the treasure. All men who rode on the trail of the blood-stained god have died . . ." And he died.

Zyras, Conan, and Shashan glanced silently at one another: three grim, tattered figures shaken by their ordeal. All had taken minor wounds on their limbs, but their mailshirts had saved them from the death that had befallen their companions.

"I saw Keraspa sneaking off!" said Zyras. "He'll make for his village and get the whole tribe on our trail. Let us make a race of it. If we hurry we can get the idol and drag it out of the mountains before he catches us. There's enough treasure for all."

"True," growled Conan. "But give me back my map before we start."

Zyras opened his mouth to speak, and then saw that Shashan had picked up one of the Zamorans' bows and had drawn an arrow on him. "Do as Conan tells you," said the Iranistani.

Zyras shrugged and handed over a crumpled parchment. "Curse you, I still deserve a third of the treasure!"

Conan glanced at the map and thrust it into his girdle. "All right. I'll not hold a grudge. You're a swine, but if you play fair with us we'll do the same, eh, Shashan?"

Shashan nodded and gathered up a quiverful of arrows.

The horses of Zyras' party were tied in the pass behind the wall. The three men mounted the best beasts and led the three others, up the canyon behind the pass. Night

fell, but with Keraspa behind them they pushed recklessly on.

Conan watched his companions like a hawk. The most dangerous time would come when they had secured the golden statue and no longer needed one another's help. Then Zyras and Shashan might conspire to murder Conan, or one of them might approach him with a plan to slay the third man. Tough and ruthless though the Cimmerian was, his barbaric code of honor would not let him be the first to resort to treachery.

He also wondered what it was that the maker of the map had tried to tell him just before he died. Death had come upon Ostorio in the midst of a description of the temple, with a gush of blood from his mouth. The Nemedian had been about to warn him of something—but of what?

Dawn broke as they came out of a narrow gorge into a steep-walled valley. The defile through which they had entered was the only way in. It came out upon a ledge thirty paces wide with the cliff rising a bowshot above it on one side and falling away to an unmeasurable depth below. There seemed no way down into the mist-veiled depths of the valley far below. The men wasted few glances in this direction, for the sight ahead drove hunger and fatigue from their minds.

There on the ledge stood the temple, gleaming resplendently in the rising sun. It was carved out

of the sheer rock of the cliff, its great portico facing them. The ledge led to its massive, bronze-paneled door which was green with age.

What race or culture it represented Conan did not try to guess. He unfolded the map and glanced at the notes on the margin, trying to discover a method of opening the door.

But Shashan slipped from his saddle and ran ahead of them, crying out in his greed.

"Fool!" grunted Zyras, swinging down from his horse. "Ostorio left a warning on the margin of the map. Something about the god's taking his toll—"

Shashan was pulling at the various ornaments and projections on the portal. They heard him cry out in triumph as it moved under his hands. Then his cry changed to a scream as the door, a three ton slab of solid bronze, swayed outward and fell crashing, squashing the Iranistani like an insect. He was completely hidden by the great metal slab, and no sound came from him.

Zyras shrugged. "I said he was a fool. Ostorio must have found some way to swing the door without releasing it from its hinges."

One less knife in the back to watch for, thought Conan. "Those hinges are false," he said, examining the mechanism at close range. "Ho! The door is rising back up again!"

The hinges were, as Conan had

said, mere embellishments designed to deceive. The door was actually mounted on a pair of swivels at the lower corners so that it could fall outward like a drawbridge. From each of its upper corners a chain ran diagonally up, to disappear into a hole near the upper corner of the massive frame. Now with a distant grinding sound the chains had tautened and had started to pull the door back up into its former position.

Conan snatched up the lance that Shashan had dropped. Placing the butt in a hollow in the carvings of the inner surface of the door, he wedged the point into the corner of the door-frame. The grinding sound ceased and the door stopped moving in a nine-tenths open position.

"That was clever, Conan," said Zyras. "As the god has now had his toll, the way should be open."

He stepped up on to the inner surface of the door and strode into the temple. Conan followed. They paused on the threshold and peered into the shadowy interior as they might have peered into a serpent's lair. Silence enveloped the ancient temple, broken only by the soft scruff of their boots.

They entered cautiously, blinking in the half-gloom. In the dimness a blaze of crimson like the glow of a sunset smote their eyes. They saw the god, a thing of gold crusted with flaming gems.

The statue, a little bigger than life size, was in the form of a dwarfish man standing upright on

great splay feet on a block of basalt. It faced the entrance, and on each side of it stood a great carved chair of dense black wood, inlaid with gems and mother-of-pearl in a style unlike that of any living nation.

To the left of the statue, a few feet from the base of the pedestal, the floor of the temple was cleft from wall to wall by a chasm some fifteen feet wide. At some time, probably before the temple had been built, an earthquake had split the rock. Into that black abyss, ages ago, screaming victims had doubtless been hurled by the idol's priests as living sacrifices. The walls were lofty and fantastically carved, the roof dim and shadowy above.

But the attention of the men was fixed on the idol. Though a brutish and repellant monstrosity, it represented wealth beyond Conan's wildest dreams.

"Crom and Ymir!" breathed Conan. "One could buy a kingdom with those rubies!"

"Too much to share with a lout of a barbarian," panted Zyras.

These words, spoken half-unconsciously between the Corinthian's clenched teeth, warned Conan. He ducked just as Zyras' sword whistled toward his neck. The blade sliced a fold from his headdress. Cursing his own carelessness, Conan leaped back and drew his scimitar.

Zyras came on in a rush and Conan met him. Back and forth they fought before the leering idol, feet scuffling on the rock, blades rasping and ringing. Conan was

larger than the Corinthian, but Zyras was strong, agile, and experienced, full of deadly tricks. Again and again Conan dodged death by a hair's breadth.

Then Conan's foot slipped on the smooth floor and his blade wavered. Zyras threw all of his strength and speed into a lunge that would have driven his saber through Conan. But the Cimmerian was not so off-balance as he looked.

With the suppleness of a panther he twisted his powerful body aside so that the long blade passed under his right armpit, plowing through his loose khilat. For an instant the blade caught in the cloth. Zyras stabbed with the dagger in his left hand. The blade sank into Conan's right arm, and at the same time the knife in Conan's left drove through Zyras' mailshirt, snapping the links, and plunged between Zyras' ribs. Zyras screamed, reeled back, and fell limply.

Conan dropped his weapons and knelt, ripping a strip of cloth from his robe for a bandage, to add to those he already wore. He bound up the wound, tying knots with fingers and teeth, and glanced at the blood-stained god leering down at him. Its gargoyle's face seemed to gloat. Conan shivered as the superstitious fears of the barbarian ran down his spine.

Then he braced himself. The red god was his, but the problem was, how to get the thing away? If it were solid it would be much too heavy to move, but a tap of the

butt of his knife assured him that it was hollow. He was pacing about, his head full of schemes for knocking one of the carved thrones apart to make a sledge, levering the god off its base, and hauling it out of the temple by means of the extra horses and the chains that worked the falling front door, when a voice made him whirl.

"Stand where you are!" It was a shout of triumph in the Kezanian dialect of Zamoran.

Conan saw two men in the doorway, each aiming at him a heavy double-curved bow of the Hyrkanian type. One was tall, lean, and red-bearded.

"Keraspa!" said Conan, reaching for the sword and the knife he had dropped.

The other man was a powerful fellow who seemed familiar.

"Stand back!" said the Kezanian chief. "You thought I had run away to my village, did you not? Well, I followed you all night, with the only one of my men not wounded." His glance appraised the idol. "Had I known the temple contained such treasure I should have looted it long ago, despite the superstitions of my people. Rostum, pick up his sword and dagger."

The man was staring at the brazen hawk's head that formed the pommel of Conan's scimitar.

"Wait!" he cried. "This is he who saved me from torture in Arenjun! I know this blade!"

"Be silent!" command the chief. "The thief dies!"

"No! He saved my life! What have I ever had from you but hard tasks and scanty pay? I renounce my allegiance, you dog!"

Rostum stepped forward, raising Conan's sword. But then Keraspa turned and released his arrow. The missile thudded into Rostum's body. The tribesman shrieked and staggered back under the impact, across the floor of the temple, and over the edge of the chasm. His screams came up, fainter and fainter, until they could no longer be heard.

Quick as a striking cobra, before the unarmed Conan could spring upon him, Keraspa whipped another arrow from his quiver and knocked it. Conan had taken one step in a tigerish rush that would have thrown him upon the chief anyway when, without the slightest warning, the ruby-crusted god stepped down from its pedestal with a heavy metallic sound and took one long stride toward Keraspa.

With a frightful scream the chief released his arrow at the suddenly animated statue. The arrow struck the god's shoulder and bounced high, turning over and over. Instantly the idol's long arms shot out and caught the chief by an arm and a leg.

Scream after scream came from the foaming lips of Keraspa as the god turned and moved ponderously toward the chasm. The sight had frozen Conan with horror, and now the idol blocked his way to the exit. Either to the right or the

left his path would take him within reach of one of those ape-long arms. And the god, for all its mass, moved as quickly as a man.

The red god neared the chasm and raised Keraspa high over its head to hurl him into the depths. Conan saw Keraspa's mouth open in the midst of his foam-dabbed beard, shrieking madly. When Keraspa had been disposed of, no doubt the statue would take care of him. The ancient priests did not have to throw the god's victims into the gulf; the image took care of that detail himself with ritual solemnity.

As the god swayed back on his golden heels to throw the chief, Conan, groping behind him, felt the wood of one of the thrones which had no doubt been occupied by the high priests or other functionaries of the cult in the ancient days.

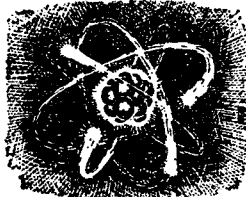
Conan turned, grasped the massive chair by its back, and lifted it. With muscles cracking under the strain he whirled the throne over his head and struck the god's golden back between the shoulders, just as Keraspa's body, still screaming, was cast into the abyss.

The wood of the throne splintered under the impact with a rending crash. The blow caught the deity moving forward with the impulse that it had given Keraspa and overbalanced it. For a fraction of a second the monstrosity tottered on the edge of the chasm, its long golden arms lashing the air. Then it, too, toppled into the gulf.

Conan dropped the remains of the throne to peer over the edge of the abyss. Keraspa's screams had ceased. Conan fancied that he heard a distant sound such as the idol might have made in striking the side of the cliff and bouncing off, far below. But he could not be sure. There was no final crash or thump. Only silence.

Conan drew his muscular forearm across his forehead and grinned wryly. The curse of the blood-stained god was ended, and the god with it. For all the wealth that had gone into the chasm with the idol, the Cimmerian was not sorry to have bought his life at that price. And there were other treasures.

He gathered up his sword and Rostum's bow, and went out into the morning sunshine to pick a horse.



universe in books

by... *Hans Stefan Santesson*

Mysterious events indeed engage our reviewer's rapt attention as he surveys a brand new shelf of science fantasy in hard covers.

HAROLD T. WILKINS' recent *FLYING SAUCERS UNCENSORED* (Citadel, \$3.50) is an interesting contribution to the field—even though it is a shade confusing. There is no quarrel with the author's basic premise that "the truth of the existence of Flying Saucers cannot be censored" (p. 255) and that "it is no longer a question that the phenomena called flying saucers are real and objective, and not mere hallucinations fit only to be considered by psychiatrists or medical psychologists" (p. 15).

There is no question that Harold Wilkins has an encyclopedic knowledge of his subject, but a cursory dismissal of other writers in the field, and pounding and pounding again at certain points, does not necessarily add up to a definitive work. What this writer also doubts is that "the cause"—if it may, by now, be described as such—is really served by the publication of such an inadequately edited work. I really feel the field deserves a little more respect.

I repeat that "Flying Saucers Uncensored" is, however, a valuable

To top an intellectually stimulating review with another even more lively and controversial seems to be Hans Stefan Santesson's delightful province from month to month. Perhaps his seven-year-long editorship of the famed Unicorn Mystery Book Club has heightened his prescience in matters supermundane. But we rather suspect that Mr. Santesson would still be a critic of formidable stature had he been born on Mars—or clasping Merlin's wand.

contribution to the field. The author of "Secret Cities of Old South America," "Mysteries of Ancient South America," and "Flying Saucers on the Attack," has gathered together a mass of data together in support of his point that "our brave new world, whose population of 'scientific lunatics' must be very large or whose official toadies appear to count the whole world well lost, if such destruction gains them titles and offices" (pp. 185-86) is under observation by "various types of discoidal and satellite, non-terrestrial aeroforms" (p. 18), observing us with increasing concern as we experiment with forces that can write a rather premature *finis* to the Earth's existence.

"Is there a Cosmic General Staff?" (p. 199) Is there a coordinating force guiding these entities, "some of them fourth-dimensional, and others from unknown worlds akin to our own three-dimensional planet" (p. 200)? *Are* we under constant observation? Has this been going on thousands of years?

The world of Harold T. Wilkins will possibly confuse the uninitiate. Mr. Wilkins wonders "how much pure or impure psychopathology" (p. 40) is part and parcel of stories of encounters with Venusians and Martians, including one discussed in these pages some months ago. Many of us will agree with him that four continents have undoubtedly "been narrowly surveyed by these most elusive visitants from outer space" (p. 201), but this

writer can't agree that it necessarily follows that "none but blatant hoaxers and imaginative liars, or impostors and psychopaths claim to have had personal contact with them" (p. 201).

Undoubtedly there have been and will be hoaxers and undoubtedly there have been and will be liars. But to dismiss *all* reports as the work of hoaxers and liars seems a little strong and even a shade unwise on the part of an author, dedicated though he may be, who in his zeal to make a point introduces an astonishing amount of undocumented and even irrelevant items.

The writer cites a number of cases of possible teleportation, including the famous case of Kaspar Hauser (pp. 100-03). He also cites an obvious example of poltergeists at play (pp. 104-05). Finally he describes, as one of a series of global "incidents and phenomena," a hush-hush "underground citadel, invisible from the air," near London, built for safety in future A- and H-bomb explosions (p. 182).

And there is the flat assertion that Russia is now producing lithium hydride bombs at the rate of more than 1,000 a year. The first bomb was exploded by them in January, 1953, "in the neck of the peninsula of Kamchatka. Its blast caused a major earthquake which actually 'dented' the earth. The seismic wave it set up traveled several times round the globe." (p. 178)

This leads us to a major point in this exasperating—but fascinating—work. "Man, in 1945," writes Wilkins, "started to use a force so devastating that it has the potential and cosmoplastic power to turn his earth into a flaming nova, and affect the whole solar system. By the appalling etheric upheaval he can set up, he can gravely affect fourth-dimensional worlds in space, whose existence he may accept in theory and deride in fact. It is from these fourth-dimensional worlds, perhaps the doubles of visible planets, that some of these space ships come." (pp. 176-77) You may agree. You may disagree. But you will find Wilkins' "Flying Saucers Uncensored"—if you survive indicated difficulties—definitely worth reading.

But enough, for now, on the increasingly embattled subject of Flying Saucers. Ballantine Books, publishers of Theodore Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury, and others representative of the more thoughtful and literate half of Fantasy and Science Fiction, bring us a group of stories by HENRY KUTTNER and C. L. MOORE who naturally need no introduction in this field. Their NO BOUNDARIES (Ballantine Books, 35 cents) is first-rate Kuttneriana, particularly the excellent "Vintage Season," the story of a group of dilettantes who could have rewritten history as they gathered

there in the city that perfect May morning.

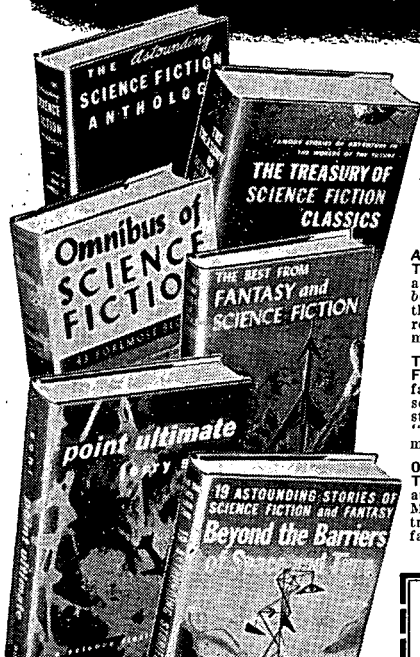
There is the story of what happened when the Professor met the "right exclusive" and rather unusual Hogbens, and what took place when a latter-day Fury stalked a man who thought he was safe—and the amazing outcome that followed close on "Operation Christmas." And there is Azazel—Azazel who had asked, "Do you know what evil is, Gerald Carnevan?" Perhaps you will agree that "the worst part of it was that Carnevan didn't go mad" when he finally did learn . . .

CLYDE B. CLASON's recent ARK OF VENUS (Knopf, \$2.00) reports on the adventures of eighteen-year old Tal Roberts as he fights for survival on a Venus that had resisted effort after effort—until the "Ark of Venus" succeeded—in penetrating the wall around the planet. Watch for the Holy War.

ROBERT SILVERBERG's REVOLT ON ALPHA C (Crowell, \$2.00), also aimed at younger readers, is the account of what happens to Larry Stark as he finds the colonists on lush, tropical Alpha C, over four light years away from Earth, agreeing with young Jon Browne that "only a united planet can win independence for us from the people of earth, who neither care about us nor about our liberty, but just about our taxes." Interesting.

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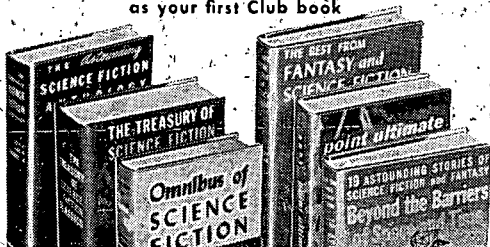
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